

INFLUENCE OF PERCEIVED ACADEMIC STRESS AND PERSONALITY TRAITS  
TOWARDS UNDERGRADUATES MENTAL  
HEALTH IN PRIVATE HIGHER LEARNING

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## **DEDICATION**

This project report is dedicated to my parents for fostering in me the drive to be a perfectionist and instilling the importance of education. It is also especially dedicated to my mother, who takes care of my two children while taking classes and coping with several challenges.

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## ABSTRACT

Mental health issues often occur among students and create negative impact on students. University student's mental health has become a growing issue in higher education. This vulnerable population has been brought under renewed attention by the COVID-19 pandemic situation. This study will focus into the influence of perceived academic stress and personality traits on undergraduates' mental health at private higher learning institutions. A quantitative approach was used to conduct this study with whereby a total of 152 respondents who were the undergraduate's students at University of Reading, Malaysia were chosen using ratio random sampling. Three types of instruments which are Perceived Academic Stress Scale (PAS), Mental Health Inventory (MHI), and Big Five Inventory (BFI) were adapted and utilized in this context of the study. The data obtained were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. The results of the findings indicated that about 66 (43.42 %) respondents had an overall score of 67 or more and hence were classified as having good mental health. 32 (21.05%) respondents with scores 62-66 were with some mental problem and were referred for counseling services. However, 54 (35.53%) were classified to be having poor mental health requiring further referral and detailed evaluation. The undergraduate students have higher level of mental health (mean=3.53, sd=1.88) as compared to perceived academic stress (mean=2.49, sd=1.23) while the overall mean score for personality traits (mean=2.74, sd=1.18) was at moderate level. As a conclusion, there is a significant predictor of perceived academic stress and personality traits towards undergraduate student's mental health ( $p < 0.05$ ) but only 5.6 % of the mental health variation can be explained by the respondents' personality traits and perceived academic stress. The null hypothesis was therefore to be rejected. The results of this study show presence of poor mental health problems among undergraduate students and need increasing awareness on various mental health issues, providing supportive mentoring and encouraging the undergraduates to seek health when needed is crucial in promoting better mental health of undergraduates at University of Reading, Malaysia.

## ABSTRAK

Masalah kesihatan mental sering berlaku di kalangan pelajar dan menimbulkan kesan negatif kepada pelajar. Kesihatan mental pelajar universiti telah menjadi isu yang semakin meningkat dalam pendidikan tinggi. Populasi yang rentan ini telah mendapat perhatian baru oleh situasi pandemik COVID-19. Kajian ini akan memberi tumpuan kepada pengaruh tekanan akademik yang dirasakan dan sifat keperibadian terhadap kesihatan mental pelajar di institusi pengajian tinggi swasta. Pendekatan kuantitatif digunakan untuk menjalankan kajian ini dengan sejumlah 152 responden yang merupakan pelajar sarjana di University of Reading, Malaysia dipilih menggunakan persampelan rawak nisbah. Tiga jenis instrumen yang merupakan Skala Tekanan Akademik (PAS), Inventori Kesihatan Mental (MHI), dan Inventori Lima Besar (BFI) diadaptasi dan digunakan dalam konteks kajian ini. Data yang diperoleh dianalisis menggunakan statistik deskriptif dan inferensi. Hasil dapatan menunjukkan bahawa sekitar 66 (43.42%) responden mempunyai skor keseluruhan 67 atau lebih dan oleh itu diklasifikasikan mempunyai kesihatan mental yang baik. 32 (21.05%) responden dengan skor 62-66 mempunyai beberapa masalah mental dan dirujuk untuk mendapatkan perkhidmatan kaunseling. Walau bagaimanapun, 54 orang (35.53%) diklasifikasikan mempunyai kesihatan mental yang buruk sehingga memerlukan rujukan dan penilaian terperinci. Pelajar sarjana mempunyai tahap kesihatan mental yang lebih tinggi (min = 3.53, sd = 1.88) berbanding dengan tekanan akademik yang dirasakan (min = 2.49, sd = 1.23) sementara skor min keseluruhan untuk ciri keperibadian (min = 2.74, sd = 1.18) berada pada tahap sederhana. Sebagai kesimpulan, terdapat peramal yang signifikan terhadap tekanan akademik yang dirasakan dan ciri keperibadian terhadap kesihatan mental pelajar sarjana ( $p < 0.05$ ) tetapi hanya 5.6% variasi kesihatan mental dapat dijelaskan oleh ciri keperibadian responden dan tekanan akademik yang dirasakan. Oleh itu, hipotesis nol harus ditolak. Hasil kajian ini menunjukkan adanya masalah kesihatan mental yang lemah di kalangan pelajar sarjana dan perlu meningkatkan kesedaran mengenai pelbagai masalah kesihatan mental, memberikan bimbingan yang menyokong dan mendorong pelajar untuk mendapatkan kesihatan apabila diperlukan adalah penting dalam meningkatkan kesihatan mental pelajar di University of Reading, Malaysia.

## ABSTRAK

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

PAS	-	Perceived Academic Stress
MHI	-	Mental Health Inventory
BFI	-	Big Five Inventory
UORM	-	University of Reading, Malaysia
COVID-19	-	Coronavirus Disease 2019
HEI	-	Higher Education Institutions

## LIST OF SYMBOLS

f	-	Frequency
SD	-	Standard Deviation
%	-	Percentage

## **CHAPTER 1**

### **INTRODUCTION**

#### **1.1 Introduction**

The rapid growth in tertiary education in the country can be seen through the rapid increases in student's enrollment in universities nationwide. Nowadays, in their attempt to attain excellence, university students face many obstacles, as they have to meet numerous commitments and experience many developmental cycles prior to achievement. Data reveals that the rising amount of tension presents a significant mental health issues for many university undergraduate students Rana (2010). Data reveals that undergraduate students more commonly need counselling (Stallman, 2010). This shows that undergraduate students may face more difficulties in a diverse community and have a poorstate of mental health.

The fundamental to human well-being is mental health. Healthy people could play an active role in religious and national growth. World Health Organization (WHO, 1948) defines health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity (WHO, 2005). This definition is affirmative that health status is supported physical, mental functioning and socially active and not threatened by any disease that could harm humans.

Mental health issues often occur among students and create negative impact on students. About three million people in this country who suffer from mental health problems are potentially to have mental illness if they do not receive any treatment (Bernama, 2003). The depression is predicting to become a cause of mental illness will rise to the second top of disease after the ischemic heart disease in the world by 2020 (WHO, 2005). In Malaysia, the findings of the National Health and Morbidity Survey that conducted by the Ministry of Health in 2011 showed that the prevalence of depression is 1.8%, and the prevalence of anxiety was 1.7% among adults. The study also found that mental health problems among children and adolescents have increased from 19.4% in 2006 to 20.0% in 2011 (Ministry of Health Malaysia, 2011). The mental health aspect is one of the focus of the Malaysian government. Mental health is a very important aspect of every phase of human life as it is physical health. Mental health is seen from both the good and the bad. Everyone in life has experienced both aspects, sometimes the mental health is good but at other times it's opposite. If anyone having mental health issues, they need help of others to overcome that problem. Severe mental illness can have an impact on daily life, and it can affect the future of the youngsters. In addition to that, knowledgeable and highly productive human capital is an asset to the economy and social status of a country. There are variety of factors contribute to the level of individual productivity and one of them is mental health, especially in this challenging economic situation. Human capital in higher learning education is said to be more productive and competitive in the labor market. The labor force or market play an important role in helping Malaysia achieves its goals as a developed nation and generate high-income. Therefore, they are the future leaders and mental health issues among higher learning students' needs to address before it gets severe. It is also important issue as it is closely related to academic achievement as well as their overall well-being.

Internationally, students' mental health is highlighted as a major public health challenge. According to Frances James (2019), one in four university students are now suffering when it comes to their mental health, with depression (77%) and anxiety (74%) revealed to be the most common issues affecting the students polled. One of the

major sources that contributing to mental health issues is perceived academic stress. In the last decade perceived academic stress and its mental health implications amongst university students has become a global topic. Everybody experiences stress in life and stress among university students are very common. Stress is one of the major factors affecting student's mental health. College is a transitional period when young people undergo new experiences, meet new people, face challenges and get opportunities that may add stress in their life (Baste & Gadkari, 2014). Stress among undergraduate and graduate students is multifactorial, arising from both academic and non-academic factors, including socio-cultural, environmental, and psychological attributes (Brand, H, Schoonheim-Klein, 2009). A national survey conducted by the American Psychological Association (APA) in 2007 found that at least one-third of university students (aged 19- 24) experience significant stress, burnout, and depression, while more than half experience significant anxiety? The mental health among university students is a real issue locally and globally. In fact, nowadays university students experience more stress and more depression than a decade ago.

There are several mental health and stress related studies conducted by researchers in Malaysia. This is because stress can have some detrimental effects on individuals who experience it mentally and physically, such as affecting relationships with supervisors, peers and family members and producing behaviors that can affect image and harmony within an institution as oppressing others. Individuals who suffer from stress also show lower academic performance than those who control stress in themselves.

Every human being has their own personality traits. Each individual personality consists of the main dimensions of her/him psychological structure that facilitates lifestyle formation. In educational setting, personality traits also known to be the main factor that affecting student's mental health. Based on the Big five personality traits consist of neuroticism, extraversion, openness to experience, conscientiousness and agreeableness. It is believed that personality will influence student's mental health in several ways. Studies found out that mental health problems among students are increasing, and this is

worrying. Action is needed as university students are the future leaders of the country (Foong & Ahmad, 2016). This study will focus into the influence of perceived academic stress and personality traits on undergraduates' mental health at private higher learning institutions.

## **1.2 Background of the Study**

The prevalence of mental illness has been shown to rise steadily among university students over the last decades (Association, 2019). Nowadays university students are very much prone to mental illness problems because of various psychosocial changes and stressors. To begin with first year university students, need to adjust or commit with new norms, second year students might be overloaded with assessments/ assignments and final year students will be preparing for a more challenging professional career. Thus, it's undeniable fact that every phase in students' life has some sorts of challenges from very beginning of the first year until final year. All this can have significant effect on students' mental health at higher learning institutions.

The problem of mental health issues is predicted to rise by 15 per cent by 2020, according to (WHO, 2012). Zivin, Eisenberg and Gollust, (2009) found that student mental health issues are growing every year. Students in higher education institutions tend to experience serious mental health problems more frequently than their peers who are not students. This was also recorded by Chen, Kumsta, Dawans, Ebstein, and Heinrichs, (2011) who claimed that high level of stress rates are faced by second year students in institutions of higher learning. In 2016, the Malaysian Ministry of Health expressed its concern about the status of the mental health of Malaysian students. Statistics have indicated a deteriorating state of mental

health concerns among Malaysian students, showing that mental health cases have risen from 2011 to 2016 (Bernama, 2016). Not all mental issues are the same as term mentally ill or mentally retarded. People need to understand the basics of mental symptoms. Problems with anxiety, depression and stress is not considered as mentally retarded. The National Mental Health 2017 has proved that at least 10 percent of the country's 5.5 million youth once thought of suicide. The same study shows one in five young people are suffering from depression, while one in 10 teens suffer from stress. These statistics prove the issue of mental health in Malaysia, especially in young people are very serious and need to be addressed effectively by all parties. In fact, globally a recent Harvard study concluded that graduate students are over three times more likely than the average American to experience mental health disorders and depression. This is something very alarming not only locally but also globally. Early interventions needed to be taken before it's too late.

At the other hand, nearly 40 years after Selye discovered stress, researchers started thinking about stress within a paradigm of stress and coping. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) were the first individual to ask about the domains of their lives and, in doing so, emphasize the importance of context to stress. Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) model stressed the interplay between the perceived psychological stress, coping, and cognitive assessments of an individual: what happens, how one handles it, and what one thinks about what is happening. Stress, coping, and cognitive assessments are interdependent and crucial for our understanding of the stress process. Pressure has been defined as a pressure-reducing agent. In this context of study, perceived academic stress always exists in every student's life, whether in physical, mental, emotional or social form. Perceived academic stress among university students has become the subject of interest for researchers today. Academic obligations, financial burdens and lack of time management skills have resulted in a number of university students experiencing extreme academic stress at regular times in each semester. Mental health and overall well-being of university students may be adversely impacted by higher levels of academic stress (Campbell & Svenson, 1992). The level of stress encountered is determined by the resources available to the individual to

cope with different stressful events and circumstances (Zeidner, 1992). Studies by Radcliff and Lester (2003) on perceived academic stress in the final year undergraduate students revealed the most difficult circumstances for students were the heavy workload, the burden of socialization, the lack of guidance periods, and transition periods. In addition, Keinan and Perlberg's (1986) study focused on the sources of stress among lecturers at universities. This research, however, took a particular viewpoint, different from Zeidner (1992), and Perlberg and Keinan (1986), that examined gaps in understanding of possible level of perceived academic stress sources that affecting mental health of undergraduate students. The few studies that relate specifically to the perceived academic stress sources are rather limited. In addition to that, Covid-19 pandemic has made things even worst. Mental health is a major challenge faced by all during the Covid-19 pandemic especially students who live on campus. This is because colleges and universities across the globe have closed campuses and moved instruction online to stop community spread of the novel coronavirus.

In this context of the study, perceived academic stress has been examined whether this variable directly affecting student's mental health. Minimal levels of stress can contribute to positive results and extreme stress can lead to anxiety, depression, and social dysfunction. Severe academic stress is also associated with low academic results (Sohail, 2013). Lower levels of academic stress do not always contribute to successful results and certain students will see the task at hand under the conditions because it is unchallenged and can get bored quickly (Uchil, 2017). Thus, study on influence of perceived academic stress on undergraduate mental health is important as it is closely related to academic achievement as well as their overall well-being. Also, university life is the most crucial stage in teenager's lives and that sometimes gives major challenges for them to socialize, adjust to new environment and live at the same time. Failure to manage those challenges effectively will lead them to poor mental health and that lead to negative repercussions. Some of them might take things too seriously or overly anxious for their future, taking failures to the next level and ended up with suicide.



Apart from perceived academic stress sources, this study explores the influence of personality traits on mental health of undergraduate students. Personality, which is the second focus, is described as the characteristic style of action, thinking, and feeling of a person Schacter, Gilbert, & Wegner (2009). Although there has been much discussion about the concept of personality, virtually all attempts on the theorizing of personality have been pervaded by two main themes: human nature and individual differences (Buss, 2008). Finding shows students at university level respond to the academic environment subject to their personality traits that they possess. Some students have the personality to handle task very confidently and tactfully, but there are some students who cannot handle tasks confidently, feel nervous, and hesitate to interact with their classmates and especially with their course instructors and supervisors (Crockett et al., 2007). It is also proposed that recorded poor mental health among higher education students locally and globally are rooted in the prevalence of maladaptive personality traits in people who are exposed to these occupations. Personality traits have been found to play an important role in almost every aspect of stress and coping as it is the coherent pattern of affect, cognition, and desires that leads to behavior (Revelle & Wilt 2013). Every human exhibits their own personality traits. Identifying own personality traits is important as it portrays individual differences in characteristic patterns of thinking, feeling, and behaving in managing stress and coping (APA 2017). Research has shown a variety of correlations between the dimensions of mental health and personality defined in a five-factor personality model that incorporates conscientiousness, agreeableness, neuroticism, extraversion, and openness to experience. For example, a higher degree of neuroticism is recognized as a risk factor for depression and suicidal behavior whereas extraversion is associated with more positive mental health. However, while it is known that there are correlations between mental health and personality traits, there is no clear evidence to date that traits are over-represented in different student populations at higher learning institutions.

According to Shirazi, Khan, & Ansari (2012), early detection for indications of mental health problems among undergraduate students is important. Understanding factors contributing to academic stress and personality traits among undergraduate

students would promote better understanding of mental health in future. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the influence of perceived academic stress and personality traits on undergraduates' mental health at private higher learning institutions.

### **1.3 Problem Statement**

To date, there is still dearth of information regarding influence of perceived academic stress and the personality traits towards undergraduates' mental health. Life as a Higher Education Institutions (HEI) student is very challenging and it's a culture shock for those in undergraduate of studies. This is because the atmosphere at the HEI is different from the school environment. In HEI, students need to learn self-reliance and adapting to the new environment (campus environment). They also need to be smart in managing themselves such as in terms of learning, everyday life, communicating, financial matters and managing time wisely.

The primary objective of the study is to investigate influence of perceived academic stress and personality towards student's mental health, particularly undergraduates. Previous studies have been carried out distinctively on the issue of mentalhealth in relation to personality characteristics among professional and non-professional students. This study aims to focus on the influence of perceived academic stress and personality traits towards undergraduates' mental health. The research focuses on depth about three subscale variables on perceived academic stress scale which is faculty work and examination, financial status, relationship and family and time restraints. The Five Factor Model breaks personality down into five components: Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Openness, and Neuroticism. The mental health factors also focus on four factors which is anxiety, depression, behavior control and positive

affect. This research will be even more comprehensive as compared to the past research as it looks in detail about the perceived academic stress factors and also the role of the Big Five personality traits, also known as the five-factor model (FFM) of an individual towards undergraduates' mental health.

In addition, a recently discovered viral coronavirus, COVID-19, has become a pandemic. The pandemic of COVID-19 poses a significant threat to the undergraduate students and has been a possible stressor with a profound effect on their mental health well-being. Previous studies have found that human mental health and well-being have been impaired by epidemic outbreaks. It discussed several risk factors. Teaching methods have been influenced by the current pandemic circumstances. In addition, the routine life of learners, as well as mental health, could not stay unchanged. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, all educational facilities have been suspended by the government around the world to monitor the transmission of disease, which has a significant impact on undergraduate students. The abrupt change from the real classroom to the virtual world is impacting student's mental health. It was also observed that there was a great risk of experiencing psychological depression in students and those aged between 16 and 24 years. Similarly, recent research found a strong reaction during the H1N1 pandemic to feeling panicked, depressed, or mentally affected. A population-based study illustrated post-crisis emotional illness after the SARS epidemic (Alamri, Al-busaidi, Binalib, & Abu-zaid, 2020). During the current COVID-19 pandemic, this study was carried out because not many scholars examined students' mental health to understand the influence of perceived academic stress experienced by students (from higher education institutions) and how their personality traits often influence their mental health.

The literature review reveals that few studies have been carried out on the relationship between perceived academic stress and personality of undergraduate students while hardly any research study on the relationship between Big 5 traits and perceived academic stress of undergraduate students specifically in the Malaysian context.

The current study will therefore bridge that gap to examine the relationship between the big five personality traits and perceived academic stress with mental health among undergraduate students.

#### **1.4 Research Objectives**

The objectives of this research study are:

- i. To identify the level of mental health among the undergraduate students.
- ii. To identify the level of perceived academic stress among the undergraduate students.
- iii. To identify the dominant personality trait among the undergraduate students.
- iv. To investigate the influence of personality traits on undergraduate student's mental health.
- v. To investigate the influence of perceived academic stress on undergraduate student's mental health.
- vi. To investigate the influence of personality traits on undergraduate student's perceived academic stress.
- vii. To investigate the influence of Perceived Academic Stress and personality traits on undergraduates' students Mental Health.

## 1.5 Research Questions

There are seven research question aroused from this research study:

- i. What is the level of mental health of Undergraduate Students?
- ii. What is the level of Perceived Academic Stress of Undergraduate Students?
- iii. What is the dominant Personality trait among the Undergraduate Students?
- iv. Is there significant influence of personality traits on undergraduates' students Mental Health?
- v. Is there significant influence of Perceived Academic Stress on undergraduates' students Mental Health?
- vi. Is there significant influence of personality traits on undergraduates' students Perceived Academic Stress?
- vii. Are there a significant influence of Perceived Academic Stress and personality traits on undergraduates' students Mental Health?

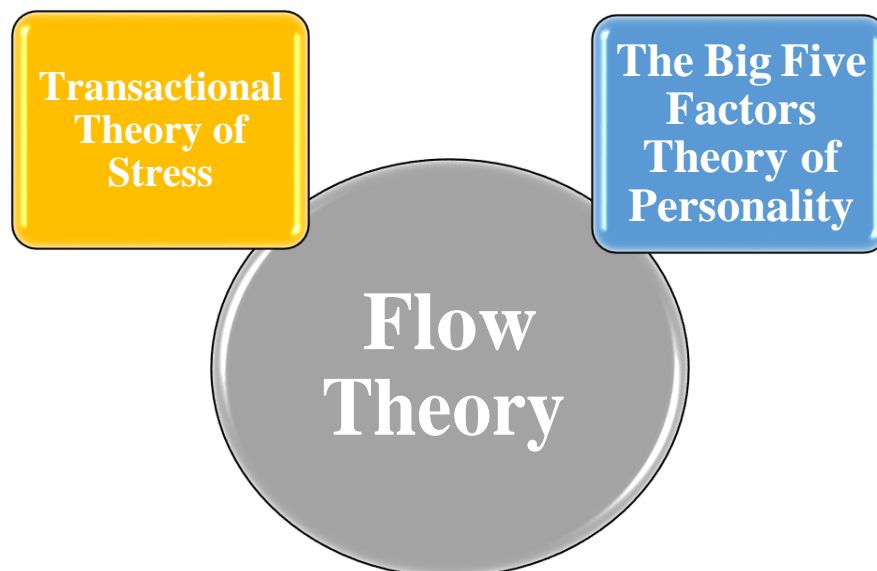
## 1.6 Research Hypotheses

The research hypotheses are as follow:

- i. H<sub>01</sub>: There are no significant influence of Personality Traits on Mental Health of Undergraduates students.
- ii. H<sub>02</sub>: There are no significant influence of Perceived Academic Stress on Mental Health of Undergraduates students.
- iii. H<sub>03</sub>: There are no significant influence of personality traits on Perceived Academic Stress of Undergraduates students.
- iv. H<sub>04</sub>: There are no significant influence of personality traits and Perceived Academic Stress on Undergraduates students Mental Health.

## 1.7 Theoretical Framework

This research study focuses on influence of perceived academic stress and personality traits on undergraduate's student's mental health in private university. The diagram below depicts the variables to be investigated in detail. Transactional Theory of Stress and Coping (1984), The Big Five Factors Theory of Personality (1985) and Flow Theory (1990) are used to explain on the theoretical framework of the research variables involved.



**Figure 1.1 Theoretical Framework**

### 1.7.1 The Big Five Factors Theory of Personality

The "Big Five" personality refers to the Big Five personality theory triggered by Paul Costa, Jr. and Robert Mc Crea (1995). Individuals Personality traits has been divided into five main dimensions, namely Extraversion, that is sociability, Neuroticism which is

emotional instability, Openness characteristics such as imagination and insight, Agreeableness dimension includes attributes such as trust, altruism, kindness, affection, and other prosocial behaviors, Conscientiousness which is awareness. This method has been used by many researchers who wish to test personality, and these are commonly used to develop personality tests for testing individual personality traits. Specifically, emerging evidence suggests personality traits have been found to be significant predictive factors in individual differences in stress responses. It is demonstrated that neuroticism is associated with attenuated physiological stress responses including cortisol response and heart rate and more negative psychological responses such as higher perceived stress, higher negative emotion and lower positive emotionality (Xin, Y., Wu, J., Yao, Z., Guan, Q., Aleman, A., & Luo, 2017). Thus, in this study operationally Big Five Personality Inventory (BFI) was used as a benchmark in this study.

The details of each of these dimensions are as follows: -

- 1) *Openness to experience*: This dimension describes openness to cognitive and non-cognitive experiences, which are presented in a variety of interests, diligence to seek new life experiences without worries. (Barrick & Mount, 1991; Costa & McCrae, 1992).
  
- 2) *Conscientiousness*: A dimension that focuses on issues such as orientation, behavior, and impulse control. It is referring to responsible, careful, orderly, reliable, diligent, disciplined, timely, neat, passionate and impulsive (Barrick & Mount, 1991; Costa & McCrae, 1992).
  
- 3) *Extraversion*: Individuals high in extraversion are described as assertive, ambitious, sociable, active, conversational, people-oriented, optimistic, and caring (Costa & McCrae, 1992). Extraverted people generally experience more positive life event (K. Magnus, E. Diener, F. Fujita, 1993), experience higher levels of positive emotions in social situations (Pavot, Diener, & Fujita, 1990), and engage more in social situations



which help to increase their level of positive emotions (D. Watson, L.A. Clark, C.W. McIntyre, 1992) .

4) *Agreeableness*: individuals high in Agreeableness are described as tolerant, trusting, flexible, forgiving, cooperative, polite, kind-hearted, helpful, easy-going, and straightforward (Barrick & Mount, 1991; Costa & McCrae, 1992).

5) *Neuroticism* is described as angry, embarrassed, anxious, hostile, depressed, self-aware, impulsive, anxious, emotional instability, and inadequate (Barrick & Mount, 1991; Costa & McCrae, 1992; Matthews & Deary, 2003). Neurotic people are more sensitive to negative affect, generally experience more negative life events, which are interpreted in more negative terms, and their negative feelings tend to spill over from one life area to another (Lamers, Westerhof, Kovács, & Bohlmeijer, 2012).

### **1.7.2 Transactional Theory of Stress and Coping (1984)**

Richard Lazarus and Susan Folkman are well-known figures in developing transactional Theory of Stress. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) state that stress is the relationship between an individual and his environment that is evaluated by a person as a demand or inability to face a situation that is dangerous or threatening to health. Furthermore, Lazarus and Folkman assert that appraisal is a major factor in determining how much stress a person experiences when faced with a dangerous (threatening) situation. In other words, stress is the result of the occurrence of transactions between individuals with the cause of stress that involves the process of evaluation Dewe (2012). In addition, the source of stress is an event or situation that exceeds the ability of the mind or body when faced with the source of stress. When the situation provides a stimulus, then the individual will do appraisal (assessment) and coping. Therefore, stress can progress to

a worse stage or gradually decrease. It determines how one's efforts deal with the source of stress.

Appraisal is the act of evaluating, interpreting, and responding to existing events Olf, Langeland & Gersons (2005). Referring to Lazarus and Folkman (1984), there are two levels of assessment performed by humans when experiencing stress, namely: (1) primary appraisal and (2) secondary appraisal. The initial appraisal is done by the individual when he or she begins to experience an event. Specifically, individuals evaluate the possible effects arising from the demands of existing resources on health conditions Lyon (2012). Lazarus and Folkman (1984) divide this primary appraisal process into three stages, namely (1) irrelevant, (2) benign-positive, and (3) stressful.

Irrelevant (unrelated) occurs when a person is faced with a situation that does not have any impact on a person's well-being (health). In other words, a person does not need any effort when faced with a problem or event because nothing is eliminated and accepted in the process of this transaction. Benign-positive occurs when the outcome of a battle has a positive impact on improving the well-being of the individual. As a result, there will be an overflow of emotional feelings such as happiness, love, and so on. Stress occurs when an individual no longer has the ability to personally deal with the causes of stress. As a result, the individual will experience (1) harmful, (2) threatening, and (3) challenging. Harm / loss is a sign that something harm is happening to you. Threat is a sign that there are possibilities that the harm will continue in the future. Challenge is an individual involvement with existing demands. These challenges generate emotions such as expectations, desires and beliefs Lazarus & Folkman (1984).

Secondary appraisal or second stage assessment is the process of determining the type of coping that can be done in dealing with threatening situations Lyon (2012). Coping depends on assessing what can be done to change the situation Lazarus (1993). Lazarus

and Folkman (1984) divide two coping methods when dealing with stress, namely (1) problem-focused coping and (2) emotion-focused coping. Problem-focused coping is a way of dealing with stress by focusing on the problems at hand. Coping that focuses on this problem can be done if it is still possible to do something Lazarus (1993) to deal with stress. In other words, problem-focused coping is done to avoid or reduce stress by directly dealing with the source of stress or the problem that occurs. Emotion-focused coping is a way of dealing with stress by involving emotions. Or in other words, someone who is experiencing stress will involve his emotions and use his judgment on the sources of stress that exist. Emotion-focused coping is done because there is nothing more can be done Lazarus (1993) on the source of stress.

Primary and secondary appraisal cannot be regarded as separate processes but is interdependent and influences one another. Another form of appraisal is reappraisal, which can sometimes mediate the assessment of the situation based on new information Lazarus & Folkman (1984), resulting in the result being modified to be less or more threatening. It can be concluded that stress management that focuses on the problem is dealing with the situation directly. Meanwhile, stress management focuses on emotions deals with oneself.

The Transactional theory stress and coping model has been seminal to the field of stress for several reasons. First, the model emphasizes the need to study real world, ongoing and external events and how people regulate their emotions and deal with stressors. Secondly, the model highlights the notion that people are in control of their stressors. It's not the coping skills that are important for individuals to have or not. What counts is the coping skills that people believe they have, or they don't Ray (2004).

### 1.7.3 Flow Theory

The theory of flow defines a specific state of mind was created by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi years ago (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). An individual is engaged in a difficult task, working away, making progress, while being completely absorbed. The main components of flow are movement and lack of self-consciousness.

According to optimistic psychologist Mihály Csíkszentmihályi, what you are feeling at that time is known as flow, a condition of complete immersion in activity. "He defines the mental state of flow as" being fully engaged, for its own sake, in an operation. The concept of Flow is a theory or basis of research in a positive psychological stream that sees that a good life is characterized by being focused, fully engaged, and enjoying the process. In other words, the concept of Flow signifies the total absorption or absorption of what a person is doing. Flow research took place in the 1980s and 1990s by Csikszentmihalyi. Researchers are drawn to optimal experiences and emphasize positive experiences, especially in places such as schools and the business world (Agustin, Purwarianti, Surendro, & Suwardi, 2014). Flow theory was used in the theory of the development of humanistic psychology by Maslow and Rogers.

Flow is one of the eight mental states that can occur during the learning phase described by Csíkszentmihályi in his theory of flow. These mental states, in addition to flow, include anxiety, apathy, arousal, boredom, control, relaxation, and worry; they result in a learner experiencing a mixture of ability and difficulty levels in non-optimal combinations of a mission. Flow is the most optimal learning of these states since it is where a task's ability level and difficulty level are at their peak. This provides an opportunity for learning and intense concentration, where learners can also feel that because they are so absorbed in the assignment, they lose track of time.

In relation, when their ability level is very high and the task difficulty is very low, a learner may experience relaxation in learning a task. Conversely, when their ability level is very low and the task difficulty is very high, a learner will experience anxiety. Neither state favors optimal learning.

### 1.8 Conceptual framework

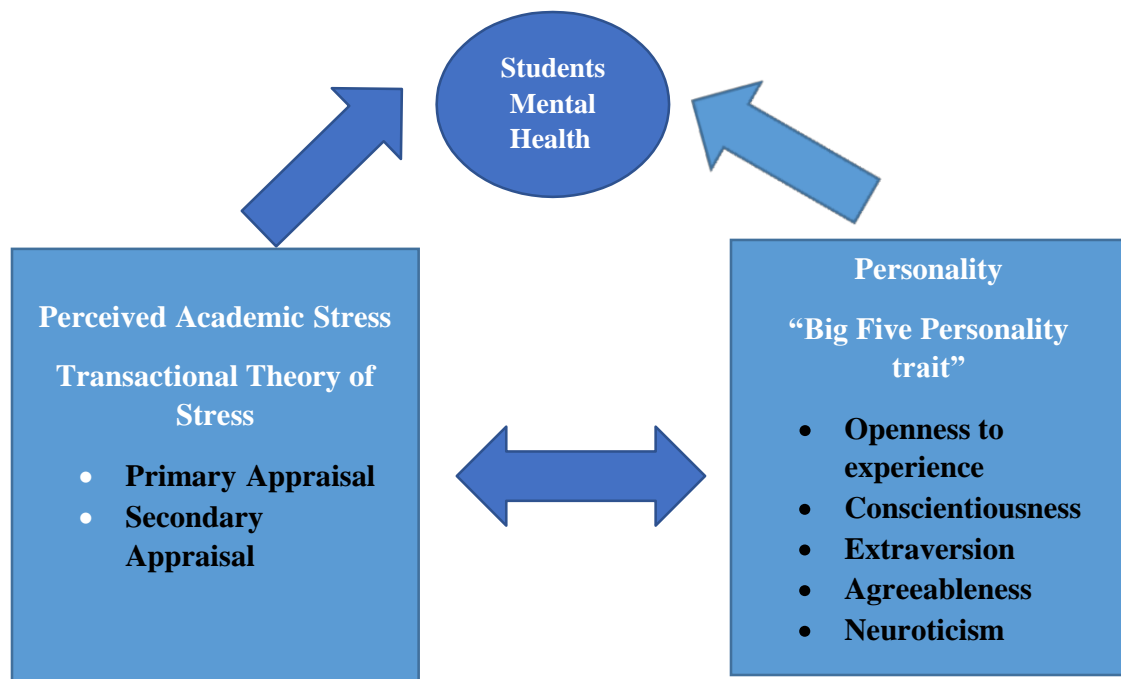


Figure 1.2 Conceptual Framework

In this research there are three main variables are involved which is Perceived Academic Stress, Personality and Mental health. Firstly, this study investigated whether there is any influence of perceived academic stress on undergraduates' student's mental health. Perceived academic stress among students has been researched for a long time, and researchers have identified different stressors. The study further aims to perform an in-

depth analysis of each subscale of perceived academic stress, such as stresses related to academic's expectations, stresses related to faculty work and examination and stresses related to academic self-perceptions issues that trigger stress. That involves attributes that are socio-cultural and psychological. Stressors in the learning atmosphere can also involve difficulties dealing with the current standard of living, the scope of the workload is overwhelming, and relationship with new friends, parents and educators' expectations of students, as well own rivalry with peers for grades is very serious. Stress can have a tremendous effect on the student learning, depending on the magnitude, it can be either a positive or negative influence.

In number of studies, it has been found that academic demands in the form of parental stresses and expectations of teachers have been linked with stress at the time of the exams or the choosing of a specific academic research or potential profession. In addition, a number of research findings have shown that the most important causes of academic stress are the impression of a massive course load and a lengthy duration of exams (Bedewy & Gabriel, 2015). Furthermore, academic self-perception refers to a person self-confidence on academic achievement, future career performance and willingness to make 'correct' academic choices. The development of academic self- perception has been connected to college students were self-worth. Accurate measurement of the level of perceived academics stress of a college student is important to the college instructor, as it affects the capacity of a student to learn.

Secondly, we have also focus on the variables of personality traits on the mental health among the undergraduate students by using multiple regression. The reported poor mental health and elevated rates of students seeking mental health care among undergraduate students are frequently indicated to be embedded in the predominance of maladaptive personality traits. A personality trait is a consistent and long-lasting tendency in behavior. There are different personality traits that people normally exhibit. Personality characteristics only come in focus as reflecting innate productive characteristics, but do

not have a role in predictive models (Shirazi et al., 2012). These Big Five personality factor has been studies thoroughly, criticized and accepted by many researchers. That is the reason to use this well-known model in this research study. The five-factor model known as Openness, Extraversion, Conscientiousness, Agreeableness and Neuroticism. In this research context, Neuroticism is a specific personality trait that has been associated with an increased vulnerability for mental health problems. The reason is individual who are high in neuroticism often tend to feel nervous, sad, anxious, highly emotional and exhibit need for approval and achievement. The five-factor model has successfully represented individual student's characteristics and their personality process. The five- factor model known as “Big five” gives a compressive framework for describing personality. Unlike other personality models, the FFM is not based on one theory of personality but rather combines a variety of theoretical perspectives (Costa, 2017).

Followed with the prediction between personality traits and perceived academic stress among the undergraduate students. The reason is studies on the influence of the big five personality traits and perceived academic stress among undergraduate students is still limited. Finally, this research also examined whether these two variables perceived academic stress and personality traits impacted the mental health of undergraduate students. Because mental health issues do not simply occur by itself, but it happens due to the factors that are happening around themselves. In addition, undergraduate students' personality traits direct them to experience a high degree of pressure and perceived academic stress, resulting in mental health problems. Typically, the response of students to their academic environment is in line with the personality characteristics they possess, and these personality characteristics are part of their academic life that cannot easily be modified. This study will therefore examine the relationship between the big five personality traits and perceived academic stress towards undergraduate mental health.

Flow theory is been used to examine undergraduate's mental health in private higher learning. The desire to locate flow in daily life was related to the mental well-being

and decreased psychological distress of individuals. Flow theory describes the mental state in which a person performing any activity is completely immersed in a feeling of energized concentration, complete engagement, and pleasure in the activity phase. In essence, flow is represented by the full absorption of what one does and the resulting change in one's sense of time. Mental health issues do not simply occur by itself, but it happens due to the factors that are happening around themselves.

In education, the overlearning principle plays a role in the capacity of a student to achieve flow. Csíkszentmihályi notes that overlearning helps the mind to focus instead of a series of actions on visualising the desired output as a singular, integrated action. Challenging tasks that (slightly) extend one's abilities result in flow. Study suggests that higher general positive affect and life satisfaction was seen among students involved in more school organizations and those who interacted more frequently to school entities. These findings confirm the research of Sternoff, Csikzentmihayli, Schneider, and Shernoff (2003) using flow theory, that suggests that affect or mood has a significant relationship with student engagement.

## **1.9 Significance of the Study**

In recent years, we have seen an alarming rate of deterioration in student mental health. That is why it is important to address the factors that trigger perceived academic stress and personality traits. Mental illness among students is one of the phenomena that is worrying many parties. Ideally, before any intervention programme is planned, it is necessary to recognize the factors causing mental health problems for students. Thus, it is very important to analyses the links between personality traits according to the Big Five Model (Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Neuroticism, and Openness to



Experience) and perceived academic stress. In fact, this study also aims to identify relationships between perceived academic stress and every dimension of the “Big Five” personality. This research is expected to make an impact in improving mental health and the “Big Five” personality of the undergraduate students so that the university not only produce graduates to fill in the jobs market but also producing an individual who are that emotionally healthy.

This research also will give the public an exposure about the importance of mental health of students. Hence, the mental health problems that undergone by each student depends on personality that exists within a student. This is because it involves a person's personality which is how the individual is shaped their behavior, their way of thinking, their perception of something and their way of solving a problem. This study is possible to make a very significant contribution in handling student's mental health issues which can give a negative impact on the education system if left untreated.

### **1.9.1 Undergraduate Students**

Generally, personality trait plays a major role in every aspect of stress and coping as it is the coherent pattern of affect, cognition, and desires that leads to behavior. Through this research study, students and educators will get to know to what extent these personality traits could predict the levels of stress that effects university student's mental health.

### **1.9.2 Private Higher Educational Institutions**

Private Higher Educational institutions will be able to use the results of this study to provide seminars or effective workshops with existing students at the university/colleges to explain the concept or strategies to deal with mental health issues more effectively. In addition, the results of this study will be able to encourage the relevant authorities to improve the curriculum framework a more balanced, affective and intellectual way to produce future graduates with a high personal value.

### **1.10 Delimitation of the Study**

This research study is limited to only the undergraduate's students from selected Private Higher Learning. The students will be randomly selected, and questionnaires will be distributed to test the influence of perceived academic stress and personality on undergraduate student mental health.

In addition to future studies, researchers may consider focusing more on other external factors such as student satisfaction level in campus life, besides academic achievement. The symptoms of stress experienced by students to make this study more comprehensive and detailed. The sample selection of respondents can also be varied to IPTA rather than only focusing on IPTS. So, student's mental state can be evaluated more specifically based on IPTA and IPTS. So that it will be more definite whether students at private university or in government university suffering more to the mental health problems.

Besides that, this research study only particularly focuses on the factors like stress and personality trait that affect the mental health of undergraduate students. Meanwhile, other factors like self-esteem, emotional intelligence, and self-confidence level also may affect the mental health of undergraduate students. In the future, we hope more researchers will look at other aspects of the issue and involve any qualitative methods in gathering data because this research study only uses quantitative method to gain relevant data in accordance to the research objectives and research questions.

## **1.11 Definition of Terms**

Moving to the term that we used in this research like stress, personality and mental health will be defined according to the context of this study.

### **1.11.1 Perceived Academic Stress**

Perceived academic stress has been described as a particular collection of academic stressors that are common to student experience at the university. Academic stress is characterized as the response of the body to academic demands that go beyond the adaptive capacity of students. According to Gupta and Khan (1987), "Academic stress is mental distress with regard to any perceived disappointment associated with academic failure or even knowledge of the potential for such failure. Clark & Rieker (1986) and Felsten & Wilcox, (1992) stated "Academic stress pervades students' lives and continues to adversely affect their mental and physical wellbeing and ability to successfully perform their assignments."

In this study we have used PAS to measure students perceived academic stress which has the elements of academic expectations, workload and examination, students' academic self-perceptions and time restrains. Agolla and Ongori (as quoted in Mishra, 2018) found that students reported high stress at university in preparation for tests, contests and mastering the syllabus within a limited span of time. Unhealthy competition from heavy workloads, time constraint (Hashmat, Hashmat & Amanulla,2008, Batainesh,2013 Mishra, 2017), lack of financial and financial planning, issues with personal and academic life management (Chemornas & Shapiro, 2013) and poor academicself-perception of students are other causes of academic stress (Hancock,2001). Carveth, Gese and Moose reported that students complain of feeling academically exhausted when it comes to facing tests, grade reporting and getting too much information to study, but inadequate time to master the details (as cited in Elias,2011).

Excessive workload and assignments can overwhelm students, which can contribute to the failure to participate on additional tasks other than studies (Mishra, 2018). Perceived academic stress has detrimental impacts on the academic success, physical and psychological well-being of students. Signs of stress include lack of stamina,high blood pressure, low mood, trouble with concentrating, impatience, and nervousness. Stressed learners are more likely to be negatively motivated, less involved, less active at work and vulnerable to social vices like substance addiction and crime (Kio, Omeonu & Agbede, 2015).

### **1.11.2 Personality**

"Personality" is comes from the Latin term "Persona," which means a mask worn by arts performers to reflect their role and personality in the performance, the true self, which contains the underlying motives, feelings, behaviors and ideas of one's own (Chan, 1996). Allport (1961) split persona concepts into three parts: external effects, internal

structure and positive view of personality. Menninger (1930) offered one of the early concepts of personality. According to him personality is nothing but describe about someone. Definition assumes biological condition and physiology of a person and it is also considered too simple. In almost every area of stress, personality traits have been shown to play an important role, as it is the coherent pattern of influence, attitude, and desires that contributes to actions (Revelle, W., Wilt, 2013).

In this context of study, personality refers to something dynamic organizational interventions that cover physical, mental, and social quality aspects that belongs to an individual and it describes how that person is interacting with himself and others. In simpler words it is concluded that each person has a different type of personality to each other and personality traits does change over long periods of time. Thus, personality will reflect physical properties, emotional well- being and cognitive of an individual. In this research, BFI has been used to measure personality traits of the students. John and Srivastavava (1999) created this scale. It consisted of 44 elements divided into five sub- scales: extraversion, neuroticism, openness to experience, and conscientiousness.

### **1.11.3 Mental Health**

Mental health refers to the wellbeing of the cognitive, behavioral and emotional. It all has to do with how people think, feel and act. We often use the word "mental health" to mean a mental illness is not present. The World Health Organization's defines Mental health "a state of well-being in which the person knows his or her own capacity, can cope with the usual stresses of life , can work productively and fruitfully and can contribute to his or her society". The term, as can be seen, uses the wording "life stresses," and it seems fair to assume that the definitions of mental health and stress are related by nature to each other. While this view represents substantial change in getting away from the conceptualization of mental health as a state of mental disease, it introduces a variety of

concerns and throws up potential misunderstandings as it identifies positive thoughts and positive thought as essential factors for mental health.

Keyes suggests that mental wellbeing is a mixture of emotional, social and psychological well-being (2002), where emotional well-being is the realization of well-being, social well-being, the realization of successful functioning within the group and psychological well-being of an effective person. He also makes a distinction between the "flourishing" and "languishing" dimensions, which reflect mental health manifestations (Keyes, 2002). Mental health problems can lead to mental illnesses such as anxiety disorders, depression, suicide, etc., so prevention for this population is important.

In this study, students' mental health is measured using Mental health Index (MHI-18). The MHI-18 is an abbreviated version of the Inventory of Mental Health 38-item. It includes elements that measure anxiety, depression, behavioral control, and positive effects.

## **1.12 Summary**

Overall, this chapter explains the background of the research problem which perceived academic stress and personality which focuses on "Big Five" personality traits that affect mental health of Undergraduate students. Although there are many studies has been done on the scope of academic stress and personality of the "Big Five" but studies on both of these factors are still less in Malaysia. This study aims to examine the type of perceived academic stressors that affect student's mental health in private higher learning. Other than that, this study also investigates the relationship between Personality and Mental Health among the Undergraduates students. Research is also done by looking at gender difference.

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