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Social Problem-Solving Skills and Self-Efficacy among Youth in Selangor, Malaysia

**Nor Hidayah Jaris^{1,2}, Salmi Razali^{1,2*}, Iman Mohamed Ali^{1,2}, Adhityawarman Menaldi³, Nur Faizah Ali^{1,2},
Mohammad Fitri Zainuddin¹, Nurin Izzati Abdul Wahid⁴, Mohd Ikhwan Ahmad¹, Farhah Adnan¹, Fatin
Nasuha Mohamad Nasir¹, Mohd Zuhairi Zainuddin¹**

** Corresponding author: Salmi Razali*

¹ Department of Psychiatry, Hospital Al-Sultan Abdullah, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Malaysia,

² Department of Psychiatry, Faculty of Medicine, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Malaysia,

³ Faculty of Psychology, Universitas Indonesia, Indonesia,

⁴ Faculty of Medicine, Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia, Malaysia

norhidayahjaris@uitm.edu.my, drsalmi@uitm.edu.my, imanali@uitm.edu.my, a.menaldi@ui.ac.id, faizah7761@uitm.edu.my, fitrizainuddin@uitm.edu.my,
nurin_izzati@raudah.usim.edu.my, ikhwanahmad@uitm.edu.my, farhahadnan@uitm.edu.my, fatinnasuha@uitm.edu.my, mohdzuhairi@uitm.edu.my
Tel: +603-61265000

Abstract

In today's society, a comprehensive exploration of the dynamic interaction between self-efficacy and social problem-solving skills within this group is lacking. This study investigates the correlation between social problem-solving skills and self-efficacy among young individuals using structured questionnaires in 89 participants. The results show that young individuals who "evaluate the good and bad implications of the decision" and "analyse problems" tend to exhibit higher self-efficacy while having a "sense of inability to solve problems" display lower self-efficacy. These findings may help educators and policymakers create interventions to empower young individuals to tackle challenges to strengthen self-efficacy and overall well-being.

Keywords: Malaysia; youth; self-efficacy; social problem-solving

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1.0 Introduction

Young people worldwide face diverse challenges requiring effective social problem-solving skills and self-efficacy. Problem-solving skills and self-efficacy are fundamental psychological constructs for youth development and well-being. The problem-solving skills encompass the cognitive and behavioural abilities to identify, analyse, and address challenges effectively, contributing to adaptive decision-making and problem resolution. In 1986, Bransford, Sherwood, and colleagues developed the famous IDEAL model of problem-solving strategy that represents Identify, Define, Explore, Act, and Look back. Later, D'Zurilla and Nezu (2010) continue to enhance further the method of problem-solving therapy by integrating cognitive behavioural intervention in their model of problem-solving. They developed a well-known problem-solving model that has been applied in clinical psychology and counselling. Their approach involves helping individuals develop effective strategies for identifying and solving problems in their lives (D'Zurilla & Nezu, 2010).

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On the other hand, self-efficacy refers to an individual's belief in their capacity to successfully execute specific actions or tasks, influencing motivation, persistence, and performance outcomes (Bandura, 1977). People with high self-efficacy are more motivated and resilient in achieving a goal, as evidenced by a study among students in a private college in Indonesia, which found that self-efficacy has a positive association and is a predictor of academic success (Basith et al., 2020). This demonstrates that an increase will match every increase in academic self-efficacy in academic achievements. An excellent social problem-solving skill may heighten an individual's self-esteem, mental health, and social competency (Golshiri et al., 2023). In addition, it improves decision-making and critical thinking skills needed in daily life (Ahmady & Shahbazi, 2020). Students with flexible coping strategies and problem-solving skills enhance their self-efficacy (Freire et al., 2020). In contrast, poor self-efficacy and social problem-solving skills lead to difficulty solving conflicts, depressive symptoms, and suicidal ideation (Rosario-Williams & Miranda, 2023). They are also more prone to less life satisfaction and hesitant to take on new challenges (De La Fuente et al., 2019). In the workplace, individuals with poor self-efficacy are more affected by uncertain situations and hesitant to take on new challenges.

In today's society, the psychological well-being of young individuals is a matter of great concern. However, a comprehensive examination of the patterns governing self-efficacy and social problem-solving skills in the youth population still needs to be explored. This study aims to learn more about how young people handle challenges by looking at their self-belief and problem-solving abilities. It also aims to examine potential correlations between these psychological elements. By addressing these critical gaps, this research strives to enhance our understanding of the psychological factors influencing the lives of young individuals and contribute to their overall well-being.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Social problem-solving skills and mental health

Various studies were conducted to investigate problem-solving and self-efficacy among young people globally. The undergraduate students in Iran, with a mean age of 21.7 years old, had a mean score for social-solving skills of 63.28, indicating strong problem-solving skills among those students (Ahmady & Shahbazi, 2020). A scoping review and exploratory secondary analyses concluded that problem-solving training effectively assists youth (aged 14 to 24 years old) in overcoming personal challenges and can boost the outcomes in cognitive behavioural therapy and family therapy, which is part of treatment for depression. However, the training alone may not reduce depressive symptoms (Krause et al., 2021). Social problem-solving ability is significantly associated with suicidal ideation among undergraduate students from a cross-sectional study in 13 faculties of Universitas Indonesia (Panjaitan et al., 2023). Among Indonesian adolescent drug users, only 23.3% scored good problem-solving skills, and the percentage increased post-problem-solving therapy to 43.3% (Setiyani et al., 2021). This may increase positive problem orientation and reduce drug use tendencies.

2.2 Self-efficacy and Mental Health

Multiple studies have delved into self-efficacy among youths, exploring various aspects of their lives, encompassing physical and mental health, education and personal development. In physical health, several types of research involving American and Latino youths have highlighted the positive correlation between self-efficacy and health management strategies. These strategies encompass managing conditions like diabetes and effective post-operative recovery (Soltero et al. et al., 2022). Meanwhile, in Asian countries such as Taiwan and Singapore, research has drawn a clear connection between low self-efficacy and mental health issues such as internet addiction, highlighting that good self-efficacy can enhance good mental well-being (Chen et al., 2020). In Malaysia, a local study has shown the significance of adolescents' self-efficacy as a substantial mediator for their mental health (Wu et al., 2023).

2.3 Social problem-solving skills, self-efficacy and psychological well-being among young people

Worldwide investigation extensively underscores the fundamental roles of problem-solving skills and self-efficacy across life domains: academic achievement, social competence, emotional well-being, and career growth (Cattelino et al., 2021; Fatmawati & Maryam, 2021). Effective problem-solving empowers youth to navigate stressors, manage emotional distress, and reduce anxiety and depression (Viola et al., 2022). Simultaneously, elevated self-efficacy reduces psychological distress and increases psychological resilience, shielding against mental health issues (Khademian et al., 2020). Italian research (Sagone et al., 2020) reveals that positive problem-solving perceptions correlate with enhanced adolescent self-efficacy and resilience. Studies in Indonesia (Fatmawati & Maryam, 2021) and Vietnam (Nguyen et al., 2022) affirm improved problem-solving links to higher self-esteem and crisis self-efficacy. A study in Malaysia noted modest connections between self-rated soft skills, self-efficacy, and career progress among Malaysian Generation Z youth (Muhammad & Talhah, 2021).

While extensive research has examined the individual impact of problem-solving skills and self-efficacy, research on the relationship between these two constructs among youth is relatively scarce, especially in Malaysia. Understanding how these two constructs interrelate could provide valuable insights into youth empowerment, academic achievement, and emotions. Therefore, the present study aims to explore the correlation between problem-solving skills and self-efficacy among youths in Selangor, Malaysia, offering evidence-based implications for culturally appropriate educational and psychological interventions to foster positive youth development.

3.0 Methodology

This study explores the pattern of self-efficacy and social problem-solving skills of young people and the correlations between both psychological elements.

Objectives of the study: i) To identify the level of social problem-solving skills and self-efficacy and ii) To determine the correlation between social problem-solving skills and self-efficacy among young individuals

3.1 Study design, sampling strategy and selection criteria

This cross-sectional study was conducted at a public university in Klang Valley, Selangor, Malaysia. The selection criteria include young people aged 18 to 25 who can speak and understand the Malay language, as the questionnaires are mainly in Malay. The participants were recruited through convenient sampling.

3.2 Data collection and study procedures

Data was collected by three trained research assistants (RA). They represent young people who are university students. Before the fieldwork, all RAs were provided with adequate information regarding the study, given training to approach potential participants and well-informed regarding the study's procedures, risks and benefits. The potential participants were approached after their classes. They were given the participants' information sheet describing the study and invited to participate. Participants who agreed were then screened for eligibility. Those who gave informed consent and fulfilled the selection criteria were recruited into the study, and written consent was obtained.

Consented participants were given three parts of questionnaires comprising relevant items to gather their sociodemographic background and measure social problem-solving skills and self-efficacy. The social problem-solving skills of young people were assessed using the 14 items of the Young People-Social Problem-Solving Skills (YP-SPSS), which has a six-point Likert scale ranging from a score of one, which indicates "very rare" to a score of six indicates "very frequent". Reverse scoring is required for items 4,8,9,10,12 and 14. The YP-SPSS is divided into four domains: i) emotional awareness, ii) insight into having problems, iii) steps in solving problems, and iv) analysing the problems. It has good validity and reliability to be used in the local young people population (Razali et al., 2023). Cronbach's alpha of the YP-SPSS is 0.764, and Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) showed that all items had factor loadings above 0.5 (Razali et al., 2023).

The participants' self-efficacy was assessed using the General Self-Efficacy (Schwarzer & Jerusalem, 1995). It has ten items that measure the self-efficacy of adolescents and young people using a four-Likert scale ranging from a score of one, which indicates "never," to a score of four, which indicates "frequent". This questionnaire has good reliability and validity and has been validated in 30 languages (Schwarzer & Jerusalem, 1995). Cronbach's alpha for the questionnaire in this study is very good ($\alpha=0.868$). It took about fifteen to twenty minutes to complete all the questionnaires.

3.3 Statistical analysis

The data was analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 28. Variables were described as mean \pm standard deviation (\pm SD) for continuous data and number (n) and percentage (%) for dichotomous or nominal data. In this study, the distribution of the dependent variable was determined using a histogram and normality graph. For parametric data, Pearson's correlation (r) was used to investigate the correlation between their self-efficacy and the four domains of young people's social problem-solving skills: emotional awareness, insight into having problems, and steps in solving and analysing problems. Detailed correlations between self-efficacy and each item of YP-SPSS were also analysed.

3.4 Ethical consideration

Ethical approval of this study was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee of Universiti Teknologi MARA prior to the conduct of the study.

4.0 Findings

4.1 Background participants

Of the total 90 young people interviewed, only 89 participants completed the questionnaires. The participants were between 20 and 24 years old, and the mean \pm SD was 21.81 \pm 0.78 years. Of the total, 20(2%) aged 20 years old, 25(28.1%) aged 21, 56(62.9%) aged 22 years old and 6(6.7%) aged 24 years old. All of the participants were Malaysian university students. They were in their first, second, third or fourth year of their studies in various health and science-based faculties.

4.2 Pattern of Self-Efficacy and Social Problem-Solving Skills

The mean \pm SD total score for self-efficacy is 25.96 \pm 5.27 and ranges between 11 and 19. The mean \pm SD total score for social problem-solving skills is 53.98, ranging between 31 and 75. The mean \pm SD score for the four domains of social problem-solving skills are: i) emotional awareness (mean \pm SD=14.17 \pm 3.43), ii) insight of having problems (mean \pm SD=12.23 \pm 2.66), iii) steps in solving problems (mean \pm SD=16.62 \pm 3.58), and iv) analysing the problems (mean \pm SD=11.93 \pm 2.94). Figure 1 shows the distribution of social problem-solving skills and self-efficacy scores.

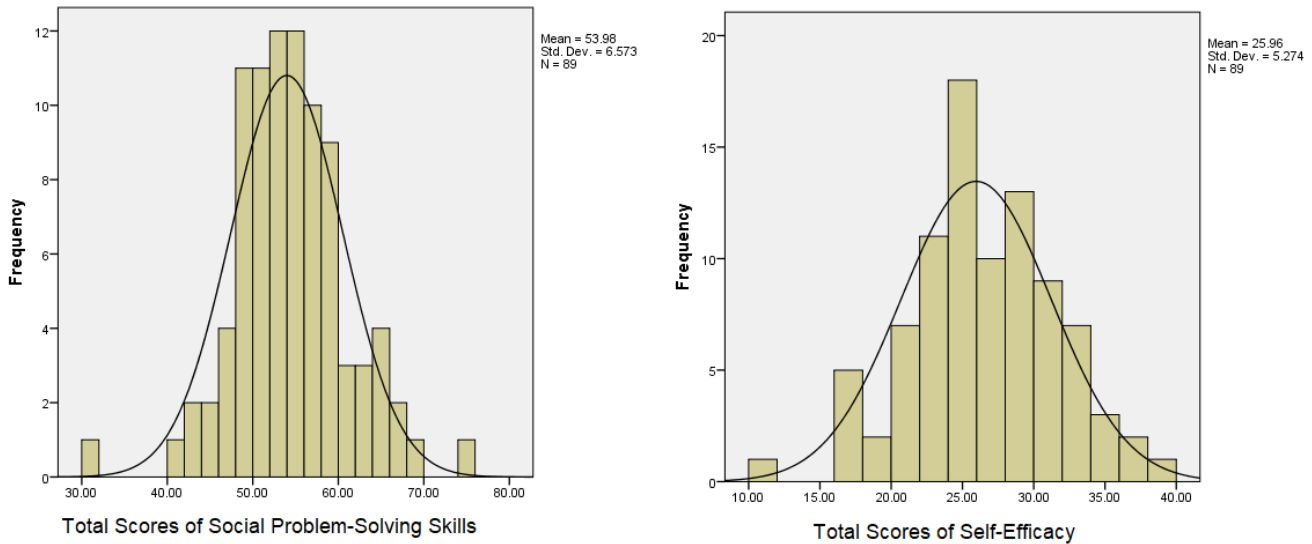


Fig 1: Distribution of the Scores of Social Problem-Solving Skills and Self-Efficacy

4.3 Correlations between Social Problem-Solving Skills and Self-Efficacy

The outcomes of our analysis, conducted using Pearson's correlation test, offer valuable insights into the correlation between self-efficacy and the three domains encapsulated within the framework of Young People's Social-Problem Solving Skills (YP-SPSS). This framework effectively explores various dimensions of how young individuals perceive their skills in addressing social challenges. The three specific domains investigated are emotional awareness, steps involved in problem-solving, and the ability to analyse problems skillfully. Our findings distinctly reveal statistically significant correlations linking self-efficacy with these three domains. We observed a noteworthy positive correlation in emotional awareness with a coefficient of $r=0.240$, $p=0.024$. This positive association implies that higher levels of self-efficacy align with a heightened capability to recognise and navigate emotions effectively, a fundamental skill for social interactions. Likewise, when considering the steps taken in problem-solving, a positive correlation emerged with a coefficient of $r=0.248$, $p=0.019$. This indicates that self-efficacy is significantly interconnected with the approaches to social problem-solving. The most robust correlation surfaced within analysing problems, where self-efficacy exhibited a substantial correlation coefficient of $r=0.408$, $p=0.000$. This finding demonstrates how self-efficacy is strongly linked to an individual's ability to analyse and comprehend complex challenges, resulting in greater awareness of decision-making and effective resolution of conflicts. For a comprehensive breakdown of these correlations, please refer to Table 1, which outlines the connections between self-efficacy and each item encompassed within the YP-SPSS framework.

Furthermore, our analysis explored the correlations between self-efficacy and individual items within the YP-SPSS questionnaire. Notably, self-efficacy displayed affirmative interrelations with several specific items. These include the ability to select the most suitable problem-solving approach ($r=0.452$, $p<0.000$), evaluate both positive and negative problem-solving methods ($r=0.400$, $p<0.000$), the ability to induce self-calming through relaxation ($r=0.345$, $p=0.001$), and the competence to prioritise problems for resolution ($r=0.383$, $p<0.000$). These correlations indicate how self-efficacy amplifies various dimensions of practical problem-solving.

Table 1: The Correlation between each item of the Young People – Social Problem-Solving Skills (YP-SPSS) and Total score of General Efficacy Scales

Question (Q)	Items for the Young People – Social Problem-Solving Skills	Pearson Correlation (r)	P-value
Q1	Saya sadar bahawa saya mempunyai masalah	0.162	0.130
Q2	Saya memohon bantuan orang lain untuk selesaikan masalah	0.166	0.119
Q3	Saya selesaikan satu-persatu masalah yang saya hadapi	0.195	0.068
Q4	Saya sentiasa rasa cemas dan risau	-0.193	0.070
Q5	Saya pasti saya pilih cara terbaik untuk selesaikan masalah	0.452**	.000**
Q6	Saya memikirkan buruk atau baik langkah yang diambil	0.400**	.000**
Q7	Saya boleh merasa tenteram dengan menenangkan diri sendiri	0.345**	.001*
Q8	Saya cepat mencari jalan penyelesaian tanpa berfikir panjang	-0.017	0.874
Q9	Saya rasa berserabut dengan banyak masalah	-0.114	0.287
Q10	Saya rasa saya patut selesaikannya sendiri	0.084	0.431
Q11	Saya selesaikan masalah yang penting dahulu	0.383**	0.000**
Q12	Saya rasa tidak mampu selesaikan masalah	-0.418**	0.000**
Q13	Saya selesaikan masalah mengikut apa yang saya rasa perlu dahulu	0.134	0.210
Q14	Saya berkata pada diri sendiri yang saya sebenarnya tiada masalah	0.138	0.197

Notes: r = Pearson's correlation; **The test is significant when the p -value <0.001 ; *The test is significant when the p -value <0.05

Conversely, an inverse correlation emerged between self-efficacy and the sense of being unable to resolve problems ($r=-0.418$, $p<0.000$). This suggests that individuals with reduced self-efficacy levels tend to experience increased feelings of incapability when confronting challenging situations. Our analysis highlights the relationship between self-efficacy and the multifaceted aspects of problem-solving and emotional awareness, all encapsulated within the YP-SPSS framework. These findings emphasise the importance of nurturing self-efficacy among young adults, as it profoundly influences their ability to address daily challenges and navigate complex social circumstances. For more specific correlation values, kindly refer to the comprehensive results provided in Table 1.

5.0 Discussion

5.1 *Choosing the best way of solving problems positively influences self-efficacy*

Young adulthood is a significant phase of life that bridges the gap between teenage years and full adulthood. Young adults face numerous challenges during this time as they strive to discover their identity and effectively tackle various problems. Choosing effective problem-solving methods significantly boosts young people's confidence in their abilities. When they thoughtfully handle challenges and succeed, it strengthens their belief in overcoming difficulties, thus enhancing their self-confidence. This process empowers them, showing they can handle challenging situations and encouraging a positive approach to problems. This positive cycle builds their confidence to handle future tasks. It is crucial for governments and non-governmental organisations to provide continuous support to young adults. Their efforts should be aimed at helping young adults acquire the necessary skills to deal with social challenges they may encounter daily. Expanding and sustaining these initiatives can significantly enhance young adults' confidence and equip them with the necessary tools to navigate such vital issues. For instance, Malaysia's government has initiated The Youth Center's Role - KafeTEEN. This centre supports young individuals in navigating the complexities of growing up with comfort and assurance. It empowers them through guidance and education, offering counselling and health services for physical, mental, and social challenges. Moreover, it provides a platform for young people to connect with peers, share experiences, and exchange ideas, contributing to their overall growth and confidence.

5.2 *Sense of inability to solve the problems negatively affects self-efficacy*

Individuals who experience a sense of inability to solve problems will find it challenging to acquire the necessary skills, motivation, courage and resources to effectively manage the challenges that arise from multiple aspects of life. These aspects of life can be personal, professional or academic. The most prominent problem it can cause is low self-efficacy, leading to multiple complications such as low self-esteem, emotional distress and interpersonal problems. If these problems are not addressed effectively, it will cause a vicious cycle of learned helplessness and avoidance behaviour, further complicating the situation. These complications affect the individuals and the people close to them, such as family members. Sense of inability to solve problems can have a detrimental effect on self-esteem because it was found in a study that problem-solving can enhance self-esteem and mental health in students (Golshiri et al., 2023).

5.3 *Ability to analyze the good and bad ways of solving problems impacts self-efficacy positively*

When young adults are capable of assessing effective problem-solving strategies, their self-efficacy rises. This ability enables individuals to approach issues with caution and optimism. Past achievements instil confidence in their ability to overcome obstacles, enhancing their self-esteem. Navigating life transitions, whether transitioning from adolescence to young adulthood or moving from a rural village to an urban setting, requires young adults to consider both the advantages and risks when addressing social challenges. Failing to make wise decisions and adapt to these changes can potentially give rise to significant societal problems, such as pre-marital sex and infant abandonment (Razali et al., 2021). In these cases, poor problem-solving skills can contribute to escalating issues, exacerbating their impact on the individual and the broader community. Strengthening positive problem-solving abilities among young adults is critical to personal growth and is vital in curbing various social challenges.

5.4 *The ability to feel calm by self-relaxation correlates positively with self-efficacy*

The ability to achieve a state of calm through self-relaxation before engaging in problem-solving activities is strongly associated with self-efficacy. Individuals who master self-calming significantly improve their capacity to manage tasks. Self-relaxation promotes a sense of control and assurance, creating a more composed and determined approach to problem-solving actions. Individuals lay the groundwork for increased self-efficacy by skillfully controlling their emotions and achieving a composed mental disposition. This foundation, in turn, can boost one's confidence and competence levels. The link between pre-problem-solving relaxation and self-efficacy highlights the critical role of emotional control in cognitive function. The ability to approach challenges calmly strengthens the insight that hurdles can be effectively overcome. A positive cycle is generated when individuals consistently experience the beneficial effects of combining self-relaxation with effective problem-solving. This cycle reinforces self-assurance, resulting in an upward spiral of greater problem-solving efficacy. The link between self-relaxation, emotional balance, and self-efficacy emphasises the importance of mindfulness and self-awareness in cultivating a resilient and capable attitude.

5.5 *Solving problems according to priority affects self-efficacy positively*

Prioritising the problems depends on self-control, centring in the human frontal cortex. Self-control is one of the cognitive abilities controlled by the executive function in the human frontal cortex. It is proven that the mature frontal cortex can solve complex tasks

compared to the immature frontal cortex (Buss & Spencer, 2018). The maturity of the frontal cortex and the ability to prioritize and solve the problem is tailored appropriately to an individual's confidence or self-efficacy. Thus, when individuals undergo training or frequent problem-solving exercises and address the issues using systematic approaches, they are more likely to enhance their self-efficacy.

5.6 Limitations of the study

The study relied on self-reported data, possibly introducing response biases. The sample was limited to a specific geographic area, potentially affecting the generalisability of the findings.

6.0 Conclusion & Recommendations

The study suggests that nurturing social problem-solving skills among young individuals can significantly amplify their self-efficacy. This valuable revelation holds the potential to guide educators, therapists, and policymakers in crafting interventions and educational initiatives that foster the growth of social problem-solving abilities, thereby instilling a sense of empowerment in the youth. The augmentation of social problem-solving skills has the potential to not only elevate self-efficacy levels but also equip young people with the tools to overcome obstacles, curb susceptibility to social issues, and adopt a healthier way of life. Considering the implications of these findings, it is crucial to advocate for future researchers to employ longitudinal designs and diverse participant samples. Such exploration would yield a deeper comprehension of the causation underlying these essential attributes in youth development. This study method might help us understand how social problem-solving skills affect self-confidence over time. This could lead to better interventions focusing more precisely on young people.

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Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

The initial work of preparing the study assisted the researchers in creating a comprehensive module to support vulnerable and at-risk youth in managing social challenges and deficient problem-solving abilities. We developed a "SELESAI" module that signifies 'solve', officially copyrighted (CRLY00007207) and has already been delivered to the young individuals we engage with during public presentations and routine clinical practices.

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