

From Home to Campus: how family dynamics influence anxiety in Malaysian university students

**Nor Hidayah Jaris^{1,2}, Salmi Razali^{1,2*}, Fatimah Sham³, Saw Jo Anne^{1,2},
Sali Rahadi Asih⁴, Iman Mohamed Ali^{1,2}**

**Corresponding Author*

¹Department of Psychiatry, Faculty of Medicine, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Selangor, Malaysia

²Department of Psychiatry, Hospital Al-Sultan Abdullah, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Selangor, Malaysia

³Center of Nursing, Faculty of Health Sciences, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Selangor, Malaysia

⁴Faculty of Psychology, Universitas Indonesia, Indonesia

norhidayahjaris@uitm.edu.my, drsalmi@uitm.edu.my, fatimah2886@uitm.edu.my, annejosaw@uitm.edu.my, sali.rahadi@ui.ac.id, imanali@uitm.edu.my
Tel: +603-61265000

Abstract

Anxiety among university students may create difficulties in adjusting to the university environment and hinder academic excellence. We aim to investigate the association between family dynamic factors and anxiety among Malaysian university students. 853 students completed the online cross-sectional questionnaires on sociodemographic background, home and university living circumstances, family dynamics, and the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory – Y Form. The predictors of anxiety among university students were determined, which include the presence of family conflict, having friends as confidants, the need for emotional support from family, family financial status, changes in family routines and gender.

Keywords: family dynamics; anxiety; university students; Malaysia

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1.0 Introduction

Globally, university students endure various challenges, including academic pressure, social and financial stress, which significantly impact the students' mental health. Mental health issues, particularly anxiety among university students, are the primary concern as the number of cases is rising worldwide. Anxiety may complicate students' potential social and cognitive performance and subsequently hinder academic excellence. While there were vast studies investigating the social and environmental factors contributing to anxiety, such as college environment, peer influences and self-esteem, the findings on the association of family factors and anxiety among university students are still scarce. The aim of this study was to investigate the association between family dynamic factors and anxiety among Malaysian university students. The objectives of this study were to determine the prevalence of anxiety levels among university students in Malaysia and to identify the relationships between various family dynamic factors and anxiety levels among university students in Malaysia.

2.0 Literature review

The World Health Organization (WHO) reported that approximately 26% of people worldwide had a mental disorder as of 2019, describing a significant burden on both individuals and healthcare systems. Anxiety disorders are currently becoming more common globally and affecting people of various age groups, including university students. Anxiety disorders also significantly impact people's longevity and quality of life, which is demonstrated by the data from the Global Burden of Disease Study 2019 reported that anxiety disorders accounted for 44.5 million disability-adjusted life years (DALYs) worldwide in 2020, with estimates ranging from 30.2 to 62.5 million, which demonstrate that anxiety disorders were responsible for a remarkable loss of 44.5 million years of healthy life globally in that year (Santomauro et al., 2021).

The prevalence of anxiety among college and university students ranged from 7.4% to 55%, with a median prevalence of 32% (Tan et al., 2023). The high prevalence reflects university students' vulnerability to numerous stressors, including academic pressures, social expectations, financial challenges, and the transition to adulthood. These factors aggravated stress levels, negatively affecting academic performance, social interactions, and overall well-being and increased the risk of developing anxiety. Studies found that higher levels of anxiety were associated with being female, residing in Asia as compared to Europe, and being an undergraduate student (Tan et al., 2023). Other contributing factors to anxiety disorder among university students were found to be a lack of family relationships and poor family function (Shao, 2020).

Family dynamics are the patterns of connections, roles, and interactions between family members and relatives and the numerous factors that mould these relationships. Family members can be the primary sources of relationship security or stress since they depend on each other for emotional, physical, and financial support. A secure and supportive family offers love, support, and care, while stressful family connections are characterised by continual criticism, disputes, and heavy demands (Jabbari & Rouster, 2022). Previous studies yielded multiple components of family dynamics such as family conflicts, parental-child interactions, skills, communications, organisation, and competence (Esandi et al., 2021). In this study, we investigated the dynamics of family communication, emotional support, family conflict, family relationship quality, financial status and changes in family routine and their associations with anxiety among university students.

Past studies have concentrated mainly on identifying associated factors such as psychological factors, academic pressure, lifestyle factors and socioeconomic background. Family factors such as infrequent family visits, lack of family support and low family income were also studied previously (Mofatteh, 2021). Although numerous factors contributing to anxiety among university students have been studied, the impact of family dynamics has not been adequately explored, leaving a significant gap in our understanding (Yang et al., 2021). Therefore, our study aimed to investigate the association between family dynamics and anxiety among university students. The findings are essential to develop tailored mental health strategies and interventions for university students, in line with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) number 3, which highlights ensuring healthy lives and promoting well-being for all ages, including university students. Further exploration of family dynamics and its association with anxiety among students may shed light on integration between the university and family to embark on the strategies that may positively influence the student's academic performance, productivity and interpersonal skills.

3.0 Methodology

3.1 Study Design and Samples

We used convenience sampling to collect data for our cross-sectional study. An online survey was used to gather information about the associations of anxiety and possible factors that are contributing to it among Malaysian university students. Participants in our study were university or college students who were at least eighteen years old and provided implied consent to participate in the study. The participants were given the option to complete online surveys in either Malay or English. The population proportion formulae by Lemeshow et al., 1990 was used to generate the sample size estimation and are accessible at <https://www2.ccrb.cuhk.edu.hk/stat/epistudies/x1.htm>. In 2021, Mohamad and colleagues documented that over 29% of Malaysian university students suffer from anxiety. Hence, for the calculation of sample size, the prevalence proportion (p) of 0.29, the probability of type I error (α) of 0.05, effect size was estimated as 2.5 and desired level of absolute precision (d) of 0.05 were proposed. The initial calculated sample size was 791 and after consideration of 10% incomplete data, the final estimated sample size was 870 participants. Source <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1186/s12889-021-10440-5>

3.2 Data Collection

A Google form was used to collect data, and the online questionnaires were distributed through emails, WhatsApp, and social media platforms, including Facebook and Instagram. Upon receiving an invitation or promotion for the study, prospective participants were directed to click on the Participation Information Sheet, which provided details on the study's procedures, benefits, and risks. If they agreed to participate in the study, those who met the selection criteria would click the pages with surveys that followed. The participants would be considered given their implied consent and accepted to be enrolled in the study when they turned to the next page to complete the questionnaires.

The Pro Forma questionnaires started by asking questions about sociodemographic background and living circumstances in college or university, and then subsequently included questions on family dynamics. Gender, age, course of study (medical or health faculties), residential areas of the home, number of siblings, number of people living together at residential college, and number of close friends who serve as confidants are among the sociodemographic and college living environment questions. Likert scores were used to evaluate

the participants' responses to questions concerning their family dynamics. The participants were questioned about their needs for emotional support from other family members, communication with other family members, and whether they had any conflicts with other family members. Inquiries were also made concerning the participants' financial situation. Questions related to any changes in the general quality of their relationships with the other family members and their families' ability to follow a basic daily routine which includes regular meals, sleeping hours, and morning wake-up times were also asked.

The State Trait Anxiety Inventory – Y Form (STAI-Y) which has 20 items to measure state anxiety was used (Seok et al 2018). It has been used in Malaysia and has good validity and reliability to measure anxiety among university students. The state subscales were assessed using a four-point scale; from not at all, somewhat, moderately to very much. The score ranges between 20 and 80. The higher the score is, the greater the anxiety. It took about 15 minutes to answer all the questions.

3.3 Statistical Data Analysis

All data was analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) version 28.0. The outcome variable was state anxiety measured by the continuous score of STAI-Y. The ANOVA tests (F) were used to explore the relationship between the independent variables and the outcomes. Multivariate stepwise linear regressions were used to determine the predictors for anxiety among the participants.

3.4 Ethical Approval

The ethical approval was obtained from the UiTM Ethical Committee: REC/06/2020 (MR/109).

4.0 Findings

4.1 Prevalence of anxiety levels among university students

Figure 1 (Fig. 1) shows the prevalence of anxiety levels among university students. We identified that 144 students have no or low anxiety (16.9%), 210 students with moderate anxiety (24.6%) and 499 students with high anxiety (58.5%)

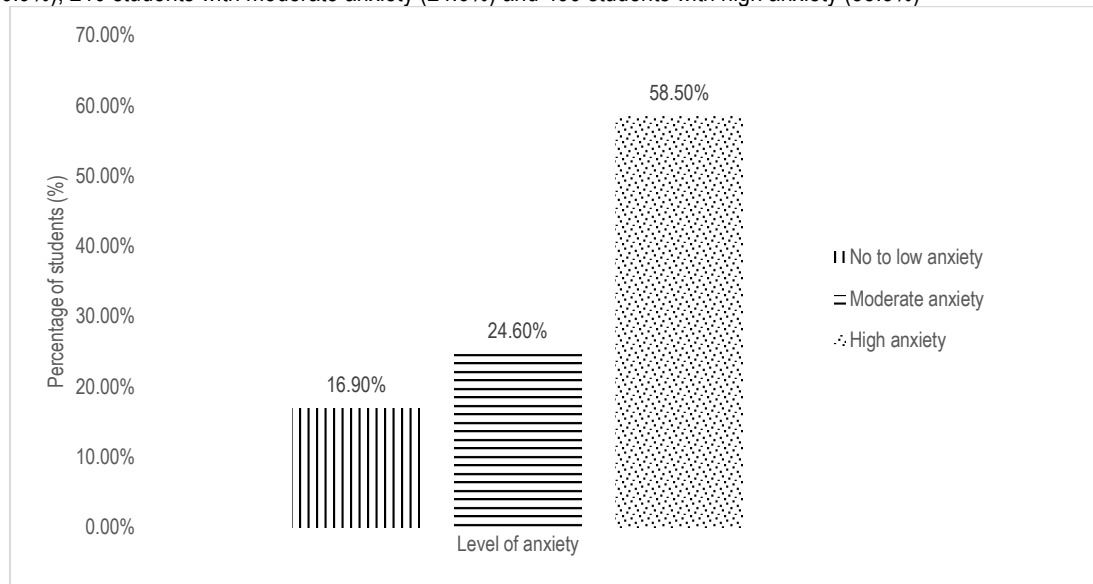


Fig. 1: Prevalence of anxiety levels among university students

4.2 Sociodemography and living conditions

Table 1 describes the details of the background sociodemographic and living conditions of the participants at home and at the college residence. The majority of the participants were female (821;96.25%), aged between 21 and 23 years old (500;58.62%), living with five or more people at home (611;71.63%), having five or more siblings (555; 65.06%) and living with five or more persons at college residence (645;75.62%). The students came from almost similar percentages of home residential areas (big city, town or rural areas). Inferential analysis using ANOVA tests indicates students who did not conform to male or female (Mean=57.33; SD=10.60) and those who had no friend as a confidant (Mean=50.20; SD=9.54) has significantly the highest anxiety state.

Table 1: Relationships between background of the participants and Anxiety

Socio-demography and living conditions			Anxiety (STAI-Y)		ANOVA (F) or T test		
		N=853	Mean Score	SD	F or t	df	p-value
Gender	Male	29	42.41	7.94	5.410	2	0.005*
	Female	821	46.11	8.43			
	Others	3	57.33	10.60			

Notes: *p-value is	Age (years)	≤20	294	45.34	8.43	1.816	2	0.163
		21-23	500	46.35	8.39			
		≥24	40	47.33	9.28			
	Medical or Health Faculties	No	506	46.28	8.42			
		Yes	347	45.64	8.53			
	Home residential area	Big City	272	46.08	8.51	0.011	2	0.989
		Town	285	46.00	8.27			
		Rural	296	45.98	8.63			
	Number of persons living together at home	1 (living alone)	3	50.00	5.57	1.062	4	0.374
		2	13	48.62	9.80			
		3	84	46.57	7.96			
		4	142	45.03	8.90			
	Number of siblings	≥5	611	46.10	8.40			
		1(only child)	42	45.62	7.76	1.351	4	0.249
		2	16	46.69	7.89			
		3	72	47.32	8.59			
	Number of persons living together at residential college	4	168	44.85	9.04			
		≥5	555	46.22	8.32			
		1 (living alone)	21	49.86	7.73		4	0.081
		2	167	46.33	8.34			
	Number of close friends as confidant	3	4	52.50	12.66	2.085		
		4	16	43.81	7.76			
		≥5	645	45.83	8.48			
		0	86	50.20	9.54		5	0.000*
		1	165	47.07	8.86			
		2	226	46.48	7.43	9.130		
		3	165	45.29	7.84			
		4	80	44.13	8.49			
		≥5	131	43.24	8.37			

significant when $p < 0.05$

4.3 Family Dynamics and Anxiety

Using the ANOVA tests as the statistical analyses, all variables of the family dynamics have significant ($p < 0.001$) relationships with the anxiety states of the participants. Students with the highest score of anxiety state were those with the least family communication (Mean=47.56;SD=9.25), the highest need for more emotional support from family (Mean=46.65;SD=10.67), frequently have family conflict (Mean=55.60;SD=8.95), the least quality of family relationship (Mean=55.75;SD=7.50), the lowest family financial status (Mean=50.36;SD=8.68), and no changes in family routines (Mean=53.02;SD=9.05).

Table 2: Associations between Family Dynamics and Anxiety of University Students

Family Dynamics	Level	Anxiety (STAI-Y)		ANOVA (F)	df	p-value
		Mean Score	SD			
Family Communication	Least	47.56	9.25	3.469	4	0.008*
	Lower	46.85	8.44			
	Same	44.78	7.81			
	More	46.82	8.66			
	A lot	46.28	10.22			
Need for more emotional support from family	Least	46.65	10.67	10.309	4	0.000*
	Lower	45.30	7.98			
	Same	44.63	7.70			
	More	46.86	7.90			
	A lot	51.34	9.65			
Family conflict	Frequent	55.60	8.95	22.418	4	0.000*
	Often	52.28	8.16			
	As usual	49.73	8.29			
	Seldom	46.35	7.62			
	Rarely	44.13	8.19			
Quality of family relationship	Least	55.75	7.50	7.919	4	0.000*

Family financial status	Lower	50.89	9.91	9.093	4	0.000*
	Same	45.98	8.15			
	More	48.11	7.85			
	Highest	43.26	9.36			
	Lowest	50.36	8.68			
Changes of family routine	Lower	46.04	7.62	39.960	4	0.000*
	Same	44.99	8.70			
	More	46.63	8.91			
	Highest	40.00	11.07			
	Not at all	53.02	9.05			
	Sometimes	48.64	8.06			
	Same	43.78	7.66			
	A lot	42.35	8.13			

Notes: *p-value is significant when $p < 0.05$

4.4 Predictors for Anxiety among University Students

Analyses using the multivariate stepwise linear regression indicate that only six variables significantly predict anxiety among university students. The predictors include the presence of family conflict, having no friends as confidants, the need for emotional support from family, family financial status, changes in family routines, and gender (Table 3). The model is significant ($F = 42.328$; $p = 0.000$; $df = 6$) with an adjusted R^2 value of 22.5%. The collinearity test indicates acceptable multicollinearity with a Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) between 1.010 and 1.071.

Table 3: Predictors for Anxiety among University Students

Predictors for Anxiety	Unstandardized		Standardized Coefficients	t	p-value	95.0%Confidence Interval for B		Collinearity
	Coefficients					Lower Bound	Upper Bound	
	B	Std. Error	Beta					VIF
(Constant)	58.916	3.245		18.156	.000	52.547	65.286	
Changes of family routine	-2.971	.364	-.255	-8.170	.000	-3.685	-2.257	1.071
Family conflict	-2.210	.273	-.249	-8.098	.000	-2.746	-1.675	1.036
Confidant	-.912	.169	-.165	-5.391	.000	-1.243	-.580	1.032
The need of emotional support from family	.882	.241	.111	3.657	.000	.408	1.355	1.006
Family financial status	-.795	.322	-.076	-2.468	.014	-1.428	-.163	1.039
Gender	2.929	1.340	.066	2.186	.029	.299	5.559	1.010

5.0 Discussion

The main findings from the present study revolved around background socio-demographic and family dynamics with anxieties. University students who did not conform to male or female, who had no friend as a confidant, who had the highest need for more emotional support from family and who had the lowest family financial status are reported to have significantly the highest anxiety state. Further analysis indicated that six variables significantly predict anxiety among university students. The predictors include the presence of family conflict, having friends as confidants, the need for emotional support from family, family financial status, changes in family routines and gender.

5.1 Family routine

Our study found that the absence or lack of a family routine may predict anxiety among university students. Based on the American Psychological Association (APA), family routines involve activities planned within the family and require a specific time commitment to be completed. The routines may be discussed, scheduled, and communicated to every family member in a timetable. Dinnertime, bedtime, chores, weekend outings, talking on the phone, visiting relatives, and grocery shopping are typical routines. The consistent nature of family routine, for example, mealtime, allows families to understand each family member better, promote better parenting, and improve children's physical and emotional well-being and academic performance. The completed activities can be significant and imprinted as a positive experience to be replayed as a memory in the future. The memories indirectly amplify the sense of self and act

as emotional support for the individual. The family routines function like an organiser to navigate life during a difficult period of life transition (APA, 2022). A stable routine at home was found to contribute to a structured home environment and foster stability and predictability in an individual. This predictability reduces uncertainty and insecurity and lowers stress risk and anxiety in university students. A consistent routine set by the family facilitated the youth to manage the daily challenges. The consistent connection with the family that developed through the structured activities and knowing the skills in managing the challenges increase resilience and improve coping strategies in youth (Beinomugisha et al., 2024). Having an organised family routine at home encouraged the students to develop their schedules and study at regular and optimised times. This behaviour may increase emotional well-being, reduce anxiety, and foster student success. By engaging with the family routine, youth indirectly learn about social skills such as cooperation, teamwork and communication (Yahya, 2022). These skills are essential in navigating life as a university student, reducing the fear of rejection and lessening the risk of developing anxiety. Therefore, they need a structured family routine whether they stay outside the college with family or when they come back to the house during the weekend or semester break. The family routine may reconnect the students with family, strengthen their emotional well-being and reduce the risk of developing anxiety. Due to the transition between school and society, students need to establish emotional connections with others. Repeated family activities that were symbolic and instrumental helped to develop a sense of belonging and later provided a stable environment for this connection.

5.2 Family conflicts

The results showed that frequent conflict between university students and their family members predicts the development of anxiety among the students. This study defined family conflict as any conflict with family members. The conflicts can result from disagreements of interests, concerns, values, beliefs and attitudes between family members, which impair the relationship stability required by the students to endure the university life challenges (Özkaynak et al., 2023). Harsh discipline, parental physical abuse, and childhood abuse contribute to interpersonal violence between family members and may create emotional distress that can be prolonged (Farrington & Tfofi, 2021). Students face heightened emotional instability as they go through the transition phase of adolescence into university life. They struggle to find their identity and only have a family who supposedly supports and encourages them to address the challenges. Disputes could emerge if they fail to manage the challenges, which precipitates anxiety in them. Therefore, the fluctuating life at the university demanded that the student to have a stable and secure bond with family. The family conflicts will restrain the students from being able to adapt to university life, reduce a sense of self in an individual, increase feelings of insecurity and raise the risk of anxiety among university students.

5.3 Financial status

Clear link between financial status and university students' higher level of anxiety may be explained by constant worry about meeting basic needs and managing educational expenses, ability to participate in extracurricular activities and social events and ongoing cost-of-living crisis (Dabrowski et al., 2024). A qualitative examination of the impacts of financial stress on college students' well-being illustrated the effects of financial stress on academic studies and social lives (Moore et al., 2021). Data from the focus groups showed that financial stress may be a barrier to achieving academic success, as it prevented students from purchasing textbooks, caused them to prioritize jobs over coursework, and having constant stress as a distraction from academics. It also affected their social lives, where they struggled to blend in socially due to financial constraints and eventually resulted in feelings of embarrassment (Moore et al., 2021). This eventually led to academic pressure and social stress, which further exacerbated anxiety.

5.4 Needing more emotional support

Needing more emotional support from family was associated with highest level of anxiety among the university students. Emotional support from family can be perceived in different forms, which include validation, encouragement, and active listening, and this may be a factor in buffering anxiety. The recent longitudinal study encapsulated the critical role of familial emotional support in mitigating stress. It reveals that students with higher levels of familial support reported lower level of anxiety over time (Johnson & Williams, 2021). This is explainable that emotional support promotes relationship satisfaction, social connection and well-being in a superior extent as compared to instrumental support (Mathieu et al., 2019). While instrumental support is important, it often plays a secondary role compared to emotional support. This may be explained by the need of young adults to feel understood, reassured, and valued to cope with the ups and downs of university life. Past findings also reported that students with high levels of family support reported lower anxiety levels and better stress management (Thompson & Roberts, 2024). This longitudinal study explores the impact of family dynamics, including emotional support, on anxiety levels in college students. It reveals that students who report lower levels of family support experience higher levels of anxiety over time, highlighting the critical role of familial emotional support in mitigating stress. The absence of social support may make it more difficult for university students to cope with the various demands imposed on them.

5.5 Presence of confidant

As reported in the present study, those who lack of a confidant have significantly the highest anxiety state. This result was in line with a study conducted among university students from private and government universities in Malaysia by Mohamad et al. (2021), which highlighted the risk of anxiety in students with a good friend in the university was lower as compared to the students with no good friend in the university. A similar finding was also reported by Chen & Huang (2023), emphasising the protective role of a close friend as a confidant. The absence of confidant limits the access for the student to seek advice or opinions, solve problems, and manage stress (O'Brien & Hagan, 2021). Similarly, Perkins and White (2021) found that students who lacks of confidant reported higher anxiety levels and fewer coping resources. The presence of a confidant not only moderates stress and psychological distress but serves as a strong

social network in reducing anxiety among college students. The recent findings further supported this through a longitudinal study, where students who lack of confidants or experience prolonged social isolation are more likely to develop and exacerbate anxiety (Taylor & Lewis, 2024).

5.6 Gender

Challenges in university life was intensified further with gender identity. This is reflected in the study result where students who did not conform to male or female showed highest anxiety state. Research has consistently shown that individuals who do not conform to traditional gender norms reported higher levels of anxiety may due to societal biases, rejection and potential hostility (Woodford et al., 2013). Bauer et al. found that gender non-conforming individuals who received validation and support from peers experienced lower anxiety levels (Bauer et al., 2015). Hence, considering both factors together, gender non-conformity and absence of friend as confidant doubled the stresses altogether (Borgogna et al., 2018).

6.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

Our research showed strong associations between university students' family dynamics and anxiety. The existence of family conflict, having confiding friends, needing emotional support from family, changes in family routines, socioeconomic status, and gender are all the significant predictors for anxiety among students. These results should be interpreted cautiously, though, due to several limitations, such as the study's design, the instruments used to confirm the presence of anxiety, and the data collection methods, which rely on an online survey that might not allow people living in remote regions or places where internet coverage is a major obstacle to enrollment. Future studies should embark on case-control or other studies that provide greater evidence for the causal link. It is suggested that future researchers conduct a face-to-face study with students from all socioeconomic backgrounds and genders. However, the results ought to inform university administrators to prepare appropriate interventions for student anxiety management. Collaboration between the academic institutions and the family is one of the techniques that might be used to ensure that students receive regular emotional support from their caregivers. Furthermore, it is essential to prevent anxiety in this group of population to have systems in place that give students access to confidants who can assist with stress management, such as mentors, peers, lecturers, and counsellors. University officials ought to give particular student groups—like those who are struggling financially, have gender dysphoria, or live alone—more help and consideration.

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Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

The findings may enlighten universities or other higher education institutions to develop mental health policies that include family-based intervention and student mentorship programs or support networks to curb the progress of anxiety among students who are potentially exposed to the risk of anxiety. The evidence also advocates that universities should design more effective funding programs and mental health services to facilitate the affected students.

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