

Examining the Levels of Depression among University Students during the Final Assignment

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Abstract

Depression is a psychological condition characterized by a persistent feeling of sadness, hopelessness, emptiness, and despair, which affects an individual's emotional state, thoughts, and behavior. This research aims to determine the extent of depression experienced by students during the post-pandemic while completing their final assignments. The study utilizes a Mixed Method Research (MMR) approach with a Sequential Explanatory design that combines qualitative and quantitative methods. The research participants consist of 200 students from the 2019 class at the State Islamic University of North Sumatra. The research was conducted from February 1-20, 2023, and followed up with interviews from February 21-23, 2023. The results reveal that male students experience a higher level of depression than female students. The faculty with the highest number of depressed students is the Faculty of Da'wah and Communication, with 76 students (38%), although the statistical significance is not established. The majority of the students (31.5%) experience moderate depression. The research identifies various factors that contribute to depression, including parental expectations, difficulty in understanding the research materials, lack of references, difficulty in meeting with lecturers, repeating research, financial constraints, loss, and laziness among students.

Keywords: *Depression, gender, age, faculty, final assignment and college student.*

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Introduction

After the pandemic, activities returned to normal as before, including for students. Students are individuals who are pursuing education at universities with various fields of study or majors (Al Aziz, 2020; Nurcahyaningrum, 2021). Each student has a different deadline, and at the end of the semester (semester 7 or 8), they are required to complete their final project such as a thesis or

scientific article as a sign of graduation and obtaining a bachelor's degree (Fitriah & Hariyono, 2019; Krisdianto & Mulyanti, 2016; Septyari et al., 2022).

However, the process of working on the final project often causes difficulties and depression among students (Krisdianto & Mulyanti, 2016; Susilowati & Hasanat, 2011). Depression has the potential to endanger individual health and activities (Altar, 1999; Gao et al., 2020; Hysenbegasi et al., 2005; Miraza, 2019; Sher et al., 2010). Depression is also an unpleasant and harmful experience for humans and affects the cognitive and somatic systems of humans (Akaka et al., 2013; Maulida et al., 2020; Yuliza, 2015).

Depression disorders are characterized by changes in a person's mood, emotions, and behaviors that result in long-lasting feelings of sadness, as well as symptoms such as hopelessness, lethargy, emptiness, melancholy, helplessness, and despair (Akaka et al., 2013; Dharma, 2019; Dirgayunita, 2016; Bringmann et al., 2015; Desi et al., 2020; Soetjningsih, 2011). In addition, depression can also cause physical symptoms such as weight loss due to loss of appetite, sleep disorders such as insomnia, excessive guilt, decreased concentration levels, inability to think clearly, and even suicidal thoughts (Belmaker, 2010; Fitriani & Hidayah, 2012; Otte et al., 2016). Previous study explain that depression symptoms can also be caused by internal factors related to personality (self-esteem), perception (past and future loss), social factors, family history, stressors, and emotional burdens (Faizah et al., 2021; Otte et al., 2016; Yuliza, 2015).

Depression is a common mental health condition among college students worldwide. The prevalence of depression varies across different countries and cultures. The prevalence of depression among college students in the US varies widely, ranging from 11% to 39%, depending on the study and the sample size. According to a systematic review of 110 studies, the prevalence of depression among college students in the US was 30.6% (Ibrahim et al., 2020). Another study of 9,482 college students found that the prevalence of depression was 25.7% (Eisenberg et al., 2013). The prevalence of depression among college students in the UK is also high. Another study of 2,318 college students in the UK found that the prevalence of depression was 21.9% (Hysenbegasi et al., 2005).

The prevalence of depression among college students in China is relatively low compared to the US and UK. A study of 6,500 college students in China found that the prevalence of depression was 13.2% (Xie et al., 2018). Another study of 3,703 college students in China found that the prevalence of depression was 15.9% (Xiong et al., 2018). The prevalence of depression among college students in other Asian countries varies widely. A study of 2,865 college students in Malaysia found that the prevalence of depression was 16.8% (Shamsuddin et al., 2013).

In a survey carried out at a university in China, it was found that 5,972 students suffered from depression, of which 1,170 experienced mild depression (19.6%), while the others had moderate and severe depression (Gao et al., 2020). A study conducted at Atma Jaya Catholic University involved 126 respondents, out of which 36 suffered from depression (Maulida et al., 2020). Additionally, research has shown that 24.4% of Malaysian students experience depression (Fuad et al., 2015).

Previous studies found that depression has negative impacts on students such as hopelessness, low self-esteem, social isolation (which can disrupt their careers), and if sustained, can lead to negative thoughts of ending one's life (Gurland, 1992; Hysenbegasi et al., 2005; Mandasari & Tobing, 2020; Praptikaningtyas et al., 2019; Sher et al., 2010). Suicide among students often occurs due to their final assignments (Mulya & Ambarini, 2019; Winasis et al., 2021).

For instance, in 2020, a female student in her 14th semester at Samarinda University committed suicide by hanging herself at home because her final assignment was often rejected by her supervisor (Dewi, Kartika, 2020). In addition, on January 24th, 2023, a final year student at a private university in West Jakarta, identified only as J, jumped from the fourth floor, presumably due to depression caused by their final assignment (Shubhy, 2023). On March 2nd, 2023, a 23-year-old 8th semester student at Jambi University, identified as RJ, was found dead by hanging in their room by their two friends; the cause of their suicide was depression caused by their final assignment and economic problems (Rizki, 2023).

Depression among students is commonly caused by various factors such as academic demands, social pressures, family and social environment pressure, and economic problems (Desi et al., 2020; Fauziyyah & Ampuni 2018). Moreover, negative self-perceptions can also serve as triggers for depression among individuals (Alloy et al., 2000). Conversely, triggers for depression can arise from students' tendency to procrastinate, which results in inadequate time management, difficulties in sourcing references, economic challenges, trouble with self-expression, and pressure from their surroundings and parents (Laoli et al., 2022).

Theoretical Framework

Depression among college students related to their final assignment can be explained through several theoretical frameworks, including cognitive-behavioral theory, stress theory, and social support theory. Cognitive-behavioral theory suggests that negative thoughts and beliefs can lead to depression, and the stress of completing a final assignment may trigger these thoughts and feelings (Beck, 1979). Stress theory posits that stressors, such as academic demands, can lead to negative outcomes such as depression if an individual lacks sufficient coping mechanism (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Social support theory emphasizes the importance of social connections in coping with stressors, and a lack of social support may contribute to depression (Cohen & Wills, 1985).

Several studies have explored the relationship between final assignments and depression among college students. According to the transactional model of stress and coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), stress occurs when an individual perceives that the demands of a situation exceed their resources to cope with those demands. When students face the pressure of completing final assignments, they may experience stress and perceive the demands of the situation as overwhelming. In turn, this can lead to the development of depression symptoms.

Research has shown that college students are particularly vulnerable to depression (Ibrahim et al., 2013) and that academic stress is a common trigger for depression among college students (Rawat, et al, 2016). Final assignments, in particular, have been identified as a significant source of academic stress among college students (Lopes & Nihei, 2021). To cope with the stress of final assignments, students may use a variety of coping strategies, including problem-focused coping (e.g., seeking

academic help, time management), emotion-focused coping (e.g., seeking social support, relaxation techniques), and avoidance coping (e.g., procrastination, substance use) (Suldo et al., 2008). However, some coping strategies may be maladaptive and can lead to further stress and depression symptoms.

Current research suggests that interventions aimed at reducing academic stress and teaching effective coping strategies may be effective in preventing and reducing depression among college students (López-Ramos & Mendo-Lázaro, 2021; Babicka-Wirkus et al, 2021). Cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) is one such intervention that has been found to be effective in reducing depression symptoms among college students (Hofmann et al, 2012). Overall, these theories suggest that the stress of completing a final assignment can contribute to depression among college students, and social support and coping mechanisms may play important roles in mitigating this stress.

Current study

Other researchers have conducted similar studies in different countries, including China, America, and Malaysia, as well as in Indonesia. Most of these studies used a single research method, such as quantitative, qualitative, or correlational (Gabrielle et al., 2022; Laoli et al., 2022; Maulida, 2012), while this current study utilizes a mixed-method design that combines both qualitative and quantitative methods. Furthermore, previous studies did not conduct a differential analysis of depression with respect to variables such as age, gender, and faculty of origin. Despite the considerable research on depression among college students, there remains a lack of studies that investigate depression levels among students during their final project work after the pandemic (Fauzan, 2022; Gabrielle et al., 2022; Maulida, 2012). Hence, this study can provide new contributions and valuable insights into the impact of the pandemic on student depression during the final stages of their academic pursuits.

Method

Design

The research design employed in this study is the Mixed Method Research (MMR) using the

Sequential Explanatory design, which combines both qualitative and quantitative methods in a single case study, as described by Fauzan (2022) and Masrizal (2011). The application of this design is carried out sequentially (Rahma et al., 2016; Sugiono, 2011). In the first stage, quantitative methods are utilized to collect data on the level of depression, and in the second stage, qualitative methods are employed to provide a more profound explanation or analysis regarding student depression by adopting a descriptive approach, as outlined by Rahma et al. (2016) and Taslim et al. (2021).

Participants

The study population comprises of the final semester students of the 2019 batch from the Islamic State University of North Sumatra. The sample size is composed of 200 participants, out of which eight students were selected for an interview based on their level of depression (normal, mild, moderate, and severe), identified through the completion of Beck depression inventory. Purposive sampling was used in this study. Participants were provided with information about the study and gave their voluntary consent before being involved.

Questionnaires

The research instruments consist of two questionnaires: a demographic questionnaire that includes questions on name, gender, age, and faculty, and the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI) questionnaire which comprises of 21 questions. Internal consistency reliability was used, with BDI having an alpha value of 0.898 indicating good reliability (greater than 0.6). BDI is a depression measurement tool designed by Beck and has been widely used in previous research, proving to be effective in measuring human depression levels (Bringmann et al., 2015; Jackson-Koku, 2016; Kurniawan & Noviza, 2018; Sorayah, 2015). Based on the scores from the 21 questions, individual depression levels can be categorized into four categories: normal, mild, moderate, and severe. Scores of 0-9 are classified as normal, 10-16 as mild depression, 17-29 as moderate depression, and 30-63 as severe depression (Bringmann et al., 2015; Maulida, 2012; Richter et al., 1998).

Procedure

The data collection procedure began by administering the demographic questionnaire (name, gender, age, and faculty) and the BDI questionnaire. After the data were collected, interviews (Hadi,

2004) were conducted to obtain further information regarding the experienced depression problem, and were conducted in a directed and structured manner (Adhimah, 2020). The questionnaire was administered through Google Form from February 1-20, 2023, and was followed by interviews on February 21-23, 2023.

Data Analysis

The quantitative data was analyzed and processed statistically (Heryana, 2020) to describe the characteristics of each variable studied. The analysis was conducted using SPSS and the independent sample test was used to examine the level of depression in students based on gender variables. ANOVA (Analysis of Variance) was also used to compare the data of faculty and ages.

The qualitative data was analyzed descriptively using the Spradley model analysis, where this model established a direct informant who was considered trustworthy or met the criteria to be interviewed. Descriptive analysis was used to explain, understand, and analyze in-depth the level of depression in students (Sugiono, 2021).

Result

Table I shows the distribution of respondent characteristics based on gender, age, and faculty. There were 200 respondents who participated in this study. In terms of gender, there were 119 female respondents (59.5%) and 81 male respondents (40.5%). In terms of age, the majority of respondents were 21 years old (84 respondents or 42.0%), followed by 59 respondents who were 22 years old (29.5%). Only 21 respondents were 20 years old (10.5%), while respondents aged 23, 24, and 25 years old were only 25 respondents (12.5%), 9 respondents (4.5%), and 2 respondents (1.0%), respectively.

In terms of faculties, the majority of respondents came from the Faculty of Da'wah and Communication (77 people or 38.5%), followed by the Faculty of Sharia and Law (22 people or 11.0%). Respondents from other faculties had fewer numbers, with the lowest number of respondents coming from the Faculty of Public Health (14 people or 7.0%). With this information,

the researcher can understand the characteristics of the respondents in the study and analyze the research results based on these factors.

Based on the independent sample test results on gender, it shows that depression in males and females are significantly different, where $t\text{-value} (141) = -1.679$; $p = 0.020 < 0.05$, indicating a significant difference in depression between males and females. In terms of the mean score, male students have a higher score (mean 19.14) compared to female students (mean 16.04). Based on ANOVA test on age, it shows that the variance of the six age groups are significantly different, where $F(5) = 2.344$; $p = 0.043 < 0.05$. Since H_0 is rejected, it indicates a significant difference among the six age groups. Then, post hoc test is conducted, and based on the multiple comparisons Games-Howell test, it can be concluded that there is no significant difference in depression level among the 20-25 age groups. This can be seen from the p-value which is greater than alpha (0.05) in the ANOVA test and in all the comparisons between the age groups in the multiple comparisons table. Therefore, it cannot be concluded that age affects the level of depression in the sample tested. Based on ANOVA test on faculties, it shows that the variance of the eight faculty groups does not have a significant difference, where $p = 0.060 > 0.05$. Since H_0 is accepted, it indicates an insignificant difference among the six age groups.

Table 1
Distribution of respondent characteristics based on gender, age, and faculty.

Variable	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Girls	119	59,5%
Boys	81	40,5 %
Age		
20	21	10,5 %
21	84	42,0 %
22	59	29,5 %
23	25	12,5 %
24	9	4,5 %
25	2	1,0 %
Faculty		
Dakwah and Communication	77	38,5 %
Economy and Business	23	11,5 %
Social Science	17	8,5 %
Tarbiyah and Education	18	9,0 %
Public Health	14	7,0 %
Syariah and Law	22	11,0 %
Usulludin and Islamic Study	12	6,0 %
Science and Technology	17	8,5 %
Total	200	100

From table 2, it can be seen that the number of respondents experiencing moderate depression is the highest, which is 62 people or 31% of the total respondents. The number of respondents experiencing normal depression is slightly lower than moderate depression, which is 56 people or 28% of the total respondents. Meanwhile, the number of respondents experiencing mild depression is almost the same as normal depression, which is 52 people or 26% of the total respondents. The number of respondents experiencing severe depression is the lowest, which is 30 people or 15% of

the total respondents.

Table 2

Distribution of respondents based on the level of depression

Level of Depression	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Normal Depression	56	28,0%
Mild Depression	52	26,0%
Moderate Depression	62	31,0%
Severe Depression	30	15,0%
Total	200	100

Discussion

The characteristics of students based on gender show that the majority of respondents were female, with a total of 119 (59.5%), and male respondents were 81 (40.5%). There is a significant difference in the level of depression between genders, where $p = 0.020 > 0.05$. In this case, male students have a higher level of depression compared to female students. These findings do not align with previous studies that have indicated that females are more susceptible to depression (Krisdianto & Mulyanti, 2016; Laoli et al., 2022; Maulida, 2012). Some studies have also shown that women are at twice the risk of experiencing depression compared to men (Darmayanti, 2015). The assumption is that women have a close relationship with hormonal changes (such as menstruation, pregnancy, and childbirth) that cannot be controlled, making them more prone to depression than men (Nazneen, 2019). In addition, women tend to get trapped in negative thinking and are more likely to ruminate on problems, which can result in getting stuck in their own thoughts (Winasis et al., 2021). However, some previous studies have shown that depression can occur in anyone, regardless of gender (Bogren et al., 2018; Khawajar, 2008; Nazneen, 2019; Sutinah & Maulani, 2017). Like the study by Al-qaisy (2011) showed that men are more vulnerable to depression than women.

Based on the age category, the majority of respondents were 21 years old with a total of 83 participants (41.5%). Based on the results of the post hoc multiple comparisons Games-Howell test, it can be concluded that there is no significant difference in the level of depression between the 20-25 age groups. If seen based on the mean value, 20-year-olds have a higher mean value, making them more susceptible to depression. The 20s are a transitional period to adulthood that demands the ability to complete tasks and development (Herawati & Hidayat, 2020; Putri, 2018). The demands of completing final tasks and independence in decision-making can be risk factors (Anggrianti & Cahyono, 2018; Krisdianto & Mulyanti, 2016; Putri, 2018). Some previous studies also show that people above 20 years old have a higher risk of experiencing depression (Gabrielle et al., 2022; Winasis et al., 2021; Maulida, 2012).

The result of the depression test based on the faculty of origin shows insignificant results. The majority of respondents in this study are from the faculty of dakwah and communication, with a total of 77 participants (38.5%). This study shows that the majority of respondents' depression levels are in the moderate category, with a total of 63 participants (31.5%). This finding is consistent with previous studies that showed 15 respondents or (49.9%) in the moderate depression level (Maulida, 2012). A study on students at the University of Riau showed that the most common level of depression was moderate, with a total of 129 participants (35%) (Gao et al., 2020; Laoli et al., 2022). However, several other studies mostly showed normal (Vasih Hamdan et al., 2022; Winasis et al., 2021) and mild levels of depression (Sulistiyorini & Sabarisman, 2017; Wetarini & Lesmana, 2018). When compared to these studies, the level of depression in UINSU students is higher.

Based on qualitative data, it shows different dynamics of depression occurrence among students of the State Islamic University of Sumatra. Interview results from a respondent with normal depression with a score of 4. HZ revealed that:

"I have never experienced depression, I have been sad but never prolonged, I am sure that the process in working on this task has been determined by the Almighty, it's just a bit frustrating due to the difficult-to-find lecturer."

On the informants with mild depression with a score of 15, RD revealed that:

"I actually don't really understand depression, but I am a little worried when asked about graduation, when and when, that question is a bit piercing in my heart, as well as the demands of my parents' declining economy which ultimately made my mind a little disturbed to finish my studies quickly."

The informant with moderate depression with a score of 26, FS revealed that:

"I have difficulty finding references that are suitable for the research title which ultimately makes me lazy to work on it, I also have demands from my family, as well as questions from people around me about when graduation is, and I often get caught up in any negative thoughts and excessive disappointment towards myself. In addition, in my faculty, I am slow in the final project process compared to other faculties."

The informant with severe depression with a score of 31, R revealed that:

"I don't have the motivation to graduate quickly. A few months ago, I lost my mother and since then I have no spirit to continue living, let alone work on my final project. I am also confused about where to start and what to do. I have lost the passion for life; I cry almost every day and have thought about ending my life because I feel that I am worthless."

Based on qualitative data, different dynamics of depression occurrence were found among students at the State Islamic University of Sumatera. Interviews with the respondents revealed that those with normal depression scores of 4 did not experience depression, they had felt sad before but not for long, and believed that the process of completing tasks was determined by a higher power. However, they were slightly frustrated due to difficult-to-reach lecturers. Those with mild depression scores of 15 felt a bit anxious when asked about graduation and were concerned about the economic demands of their parents. This made them feel disturbed and not able to finish their studies quickly. Respondents with moderate depression scores of 26 faced difficulties in finding suitable references for their research, experienced family pressures, and were bothered by negative thoughts and excessive disappointment. They were also slower in completing their final projects compared to students from other faculties. Those with severe depression scores of 31 had lost their motivation to graduate, especially after the recent loss of their mother. They felt that life had

lost its meaning and they didn't know where to start or what to do. They cried almost every day and had thoughts of ending their lives.

The interview results of the respondents above are consistent with previous research, which revealed that demands from people around them, difficulty finding references, difficulty meeting lecturers, financial problems, and laziness in completing tasks are contributing factors to depression among students (Dianovinina, 2018; Faizah et al., 2021; Gabrielle et al., 2022; Krisdianto & Mulyanti, 2016; Laoli et al., 2022).

Student depression is influenced by both internal and external factors (Dirgayunita, 2016). Internal factors include difficulty understanding the material, difficulty finding references, poor time management during the completion process, and a tendency to be lazy (Dewi, 2019; Laoli et al., 2022). Previous studies have shown that 69.9% of students postpone final project work, 64.5% have difficulty managing time, 55.6% tend to be lazy in completing tasks, and 56.1% have difficulty finding references (Kaewpila et al., 2020; Laoli et al., 2022).

External factors include pressure from parents and the surrounding environment, as well as difficulty meeting with lecturers. Parents and the surrounding environment often demand that students achieve their expectations of academic success and career in the future. These expectations are considered important factors in achieving future happiness (Dewi, 2019; Martsari & Ediati, 2020). The surrounding environment often asks about the schedule of thesis defense and graduation, while difficulties in meeting with lecturers are often caused by changes in guidance schedules and reasons such as sudden business or out-of-town trips (Zain et al., 2021).

In addition to internal and external factors, supportive factors such as financial conditions and motivation also affect student depression. Family financial conditions play a crucial role in student depression. Students who have financial difficulties are more vulnerable to depression than those who have better financial conditions. Previous studies have shown that depression is also related to low motivation in students.

The research has some limitations due to a relatively small sample size that may not be representative of the entire population. The small number of respondents will have implications for the generalization of research results that need to be applied with caution. For future research, it is recommended to involve more representative samples and expand the questionnaire to various universities in order to improve the representativeness of the research results. Additionally, the study design is cross-sectional rather than longitudinal, which means that the results cannot provide a precise depiction of cause-and-effect relationships.

Conclusion

According to the findings of the research, there is variation in the level of depression among students when it comes to completing their final assignments. It was observed that male students have a higher level of depression compared to female students. Although not statistically significant, the Faculty of Da'wah and Communication has the highest number of students experiencing depression with 76 students (38%). Additionally, the majority of respondents reported experiencing a moderate level of depression, which accounted for 63 students (31.5%). The study identified several factors that contribute to depression, including parental pressure, difficulty understanding the material, lack of references, difficulty in meeting with lecturers, repeating research, financial issues, loss, and student laziness.

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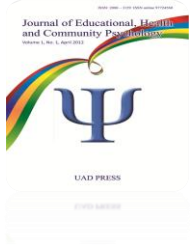
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