

## SOCIAL SUPPORT AMONG STUDENTS IN A MALAYSIA PUBLIC UNIVERSITY: A PRELIMINARY STUDY

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**Abstract:** Social support has always been an important interpersonal resources derived from one's immediate social network. Individual need supports from external environment that may provide happiness once they are born. In this context, it can be said that social support, means getting all kinds of support and assistance from the sources that affect them such as family, friends or an important person. The purpose of this study is to examine the level of social support among students. The study group consisted of 211 respondents (156 girls, 55 males) in a public university in Malaysia. The data were collected through the English versions of Social Support Scale with Malay translation. Descriptive analysis and independent T-Test were calculated, and path analysis was performed based on the observed variables. The result showed that there was significant difference between male and female students in social support where female students had a higher level of social support than male students. The first-generation students and the non-first-generation students have no difference in the level of social support.

**Keywords:** *Social Support, Students, Genders, First-Generation Students*

### INTRODUCTION

Multidimensionality of social support has been widely acknowledged. Social support helps individuals to reduce the amount of stress experienced and to cope better in dealing with stressful life situations. The beneficial impact of social support has been associated with both physical and mental health outcomes. Individual need support from external environment that may provide happiness once they are born. In this context, it can be said that social support means getting all kinds of support and assistance from the sources that affect them such as family, friends or an important persons (Cohen & Hoberman, 1983). Social support is one of the most important factors in the one student's life. This support is primarily family and, in time, the social circle that the individual creates.

Social support is closely related to ties with family, friends, neighbours, and others of significance to the person which includes empathy, concern, caring, love, and trust. Social support is commonly defined by the characteristic of social environment, social networks, and the benefits that they provide (Cohen & Matthews, 1987). Researchers have described social support's beneficial effects (Abbey, Abramis, & Caplan, 1985; Caplan, 1979; Cobb, 1976; Lieberman, 1982; Sarason, Levine, Basham, & Sarason, 1983; Williams, Ware, & Donald, 1981). Social support helps individuals to reduce the amount of stress experienced and to cope better in dealing with stressful life situations.

Social support is fundamental to young people, especially important decisions-making in life stage such as their career future. Perceived social support can be described as a kind of personal perception or feeling that one is being cared for by other persons, which can be in form of moral or material support from them. Quimby and O'Brien (2004) found that perceptions of robust social support resulted in feelings of confidence both in managing the responsibilities associated with being a student and pursuing tasks related to advancing vocational development.

### PROBLEM STATEMENT

Most of the existing researches conducted in the past are based on social support mainly with other variables whereas research based on social support solely is still limited especially in Malaysia. Most people know the existence of social support but they have neglected the real meaning of practicing this variable in one's growing process. As we are aware, Malaysia is a multiracial country with different types of background history. However, do they perceive the identical meaning of social support? Does each and every of the student receive social support? Another concern is that the feminine qualities always better prepare people to look for, getting, and provide support than do masculine qualities is in the nature of individual in social support. Thus, what is the difference in social support between male

and female in Malaysia? Do they perceive the same amount of social support? This has brought into a deep concern for the higher education to find ways to fully emphasize the importance of social support among students in this generation for better involvement. Therefore, researcher decided to conduct this study to access social support among university students.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Social Support and Gender

From a study done by Mitchell et al 26 showed that female adolescents reported more support from family and friends. In a study done by Ramaswamy et al., (2009) found that girls, compared to boys, perceived friends as providing more social support. This might because girls were likely to be better than male students in socializing and in seeking help from friends. Gender differences in the structure of perceived social support can be explained by socialization experiences and social roles associated with gender.

Besides, it is also reported that females perceived significant higher social support than males in one of the similar studies done in Malaysia by Tam et al., (2011). This also can be indicated that female students have a better relationship with their family and their parents might be more protective with their female children by providing more support on them. Another explanation could be that females are increasing enthusiastic as compared to males, thus they may most likely ready to share their emotions and feelings more freely with peers. By doing so, the females understand having somebody to speak to as having adequate social help.

### Social Support and First-Generation

A first-generation student is defined as a student whose parent(s)/legal guardian(s) have not completed a bachelor's degree. Some of the features that differentiate first-generation students from other students may raise their stress vulnerability and may also limit their access to social support. However, in one of the research objective was to find out the difference in social support between first generation students and non-first generation students. According to the findings, it was found that there that there was no significance difference in social support between first generation students and non-first generation students in a public university with an average mean of 33 for both of it. The finding in this study can be correlated with the study by Purswell, Yazedjian, and Toews (2008) which they also that the social support from parents and peers got no generational differences, but the related academic behaviours was relatedly helpful for the students who have the college-educated parents. For example, help to speak up in class or meeting assignment deadlines. Thus, there was no such association for first generation students.

### Alfred Adler Social Interest Theory

Probably the best thing Adler accepted was giving individuals a feeling of having a place. Individuals are their best selves when they feel associated and adored by people around them. This is particularly significant in nuclear families that flourish with assistance from each in the family. Thus, the social interest theory is a theory that attempts to explain the relationship between a person and the people he deals with in his society.

One of Adler's key ideas is that of social interest which interprets as "community feeling," instead of one's private advantages or concerns. In this training, it is emphasize to examine the whole individual as this is the thing that will provide hints with respect to where development can start. Individuals improve when they are made to feel esteemed. By setting an incentive on the individual and welcoming them as whole, they can start to build up a positive improvement in their way of life. One's "style of life" is the arrangement of translations and individual accounts one has contrived in order to adapt to being in the world. On the off chance that one has social interest, at that point one confirmations or authorizes a "helpful" style of life. If one is lack of have social interest, at that point one is self-consumed and is concerned distinctly with one's self. Such a style of life is "useless."

## OBJECTIVES AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

### Research Objectives

The objectives of the study are as shown below:

1. To determine the level of social support among students in a public university.

2. To study the difference in social support between male and female among students in a public university.
3. To examine the difference in social support between first generation students and non-first generation students in a public university.

### Research Questions

Based on the objectives of the study, the following research questions:

1. What is the level of social support among students in a public university?
2. Is there a significant difference in social support between male and female among students in a public university?
3. Is there a significant difference in social support between first generation students and non-first generation students in a public university?

### METHODOLOGY

For this research, cross-sectional design is used in this study. It is a type of study that assesses the sample at one specific point in time without finding the reasons behind. At the same time, this research is in a form of descriptive research. Descriptive research is a research method that illustrates the characteristics of population and incident that is being studied. In other words, descriptive research basically focuses on defining the nature of a demographic segment, without focusing on the reason a certain phenomenon occurs. In other words, it “defines” the subject of the research, without covering “why” it happens.

Researcher carries out a survey by distributing a set of questionnaires to selected samples at one time. This is to find out on the social support provided by parents and peers its relationship towards other demographic factors such as gender and first-generation students. The sample selected in this study is university students at a public university in Malaysia.

### Instrument

An instrument in the form of a questionnaire was used in this study for the purpose of gathering data. This questionnaire was divided into two parts which are the demographic sections at the first page, followed by the second part which is the modified and translated Social Support Scale Demography. Part A in the questionnaires includes the items related to the personal information of the respondents such as their age, gender, and level of qualification. There are two options regarding their level of qualification: Undergraduates and Postgraduates. The respondents are required to state and select the responses that describe their background while the identities and other forms of personal information remain anonymous.

**Demography.** This section is related to the samples’ background of the respondent which was gender, races from given options of Malay, Indian, Chinese or Others. Another item will be the first generation students or not first generation students where the respondents had to answer by marking ( $\surd$ ) in the spaces provided. In addition, the last item will be the respondents’ faculty which they need to fill in themselves.

**Social Support Scale.** The Social Support Scale by Hamby, Grych and Banyard (2015) comprised of 11 items instrument that measured perceived social support from three domains of family, friends, and adults other than family. The whole 11 items instruments are divided into three subscales. Items 1 to 4 are related to family support including their parents and siblings whereas item 5 to 7 are related to peers’ support referring to individual’s friends. Item 8 to 10 were added to identify close others in addition to family members that may be sources of social support. Furthermore, item 11 as added for the Life Paths study to assess childhood levels of social support from close other.

The instrument was revised from the Multidimensional Measure of Perceived Social Support by Zimet, Dahlem, Zimet and Farley (1988). Participants are needed to answer to each item on a 4-Point Likert-type scale range from 1 (not true about me) to 4 (mostly true about me). Participants can only choose one scale for each question.

### Reliability of Social Support Scale

The reliability and validity of this MMPSS is high where Zimet and his colleagues reported a Cronbach alpha level of .88 for the scale. They also checked the test-retest reliability of the scale and reported this as .85 (Zimet et al., 1988). In the present study, the internal consistency was accepted in the total score for the Social Support Scale ( $\alpha = .88$ ). Researcher had done a reliability test using the data collected on this study. The alpha coefficient for the eleven items was .85, suggesting that the items have relatively acceptable internal consistency.

### Sample

The sample for this study consisted of a number of 211 students from a public university. All of the students are currently pursuing their respective studies in their respective faculties in the public university. The questionnaire was distributed randomly and was given a brief instruction stated in the questionnaire. All of the respondents completed the questionnaire independently and the result was submitted to the researcher. After finalizing the data, samples of this research consists of total number of 55 males and 156 females of undergraduate. The age of the participants ranged from 19 to 50 years old.

### Statistical Analysis

In order to obtain the results of the study based on the questionnaire related to the level of mattering scale among the respondents, data analysis was conducted. The data obtained in this research is analysed using computer software which is known as Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) for Windows. The types of statistical analysis such as descriptive analysis and inferential analysis (mean, median, standard deviation and T-Test) are utilized in the process of analysis of the data.

## ANALYSIS DATA AND FINDINGS

In this study, 211 respondents are obtained from a public university in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. The data on demographical analysis is analysed in the form of a percentage (%) and frequency. The finding shows the frequency and percentage of 211 respondents involved in this study. The results showed the frequency of females are about thrice the amount of the male respondents. Out of the total of 211 participants, there are 55 or 26.1% are males whereas 156 or 73.9% of them are females. The mean or average age of the respondents ( $n = 211$ ) in this study is 24.49 years old and the mode age is 21 years old. The youngest respondent in this study is 19 years old and the oldest is 50 years old. Besides, this finding also showed the frequency of current level of study of the respondents. Out of 221 participants, 149 participants or 70.6% of them are currently undergraduate's students. On the other hand, only 62 participants or 29.4% are postgraduate's students. The findings also showed the first generation students among the total of 211 respondents. Out of 221 respondents, 79 respondents or 37.4% are first generation students but with majority of 132 respondents or 62.6% of them are not first generation students.

### Level of Social Support among University Students

To study the research question 1, descriptive analysis was done. It showed that the mean score for the level of social support among students in a public university is 33.42 with standard deviation of 6.17 and it ranged from 13 to 44 in Table 1.

Table 1  
*Descriptive Statistics of Level of Social Support*

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Total Social Support	211	13.00	44.00	33.42	6.17
Valid N	211				

The level of social support for the respondents was actually quite high as it came with a mean of 33.42 out of 44.00. This also showed that students in a public university averagely at least gain some social support from either their parents, peers of significant others.

### Level of Social Support by Gender

To see any difference in social support between males and females among students in a public university, T-test is run using SPSS. Table 2 showed the mean and standard deviation between genders among students in a public university whereas Table 3 is the result of the independent sample test for social support between genders among students in a public university.

Table 2

*Group Statistics of social support between male and female among students in a public university*

	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Total Social Support	Male	55	31.5091	6.59369	.88909
	Female	156	34.0897	5.88861	.47147

Null Hypothesis is created as shown as below:

$H_0$ : There is no significance difference in social support between male and female among students in a public university

Table 3

*Independent Samples Test for social support between male and female among students in a public university*

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means							
		F	Sig.	T	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Diff.	Std. Error Diff.	95% Confidence Interval of the Diff.		
								Lower	Upper		
Total Social Support	Equal variances assumed	.217	.642	-2.707	209	.007	-2.58065	.95324	-4.45985	-.70145	
	Equal variances not assumed			-2.564	86.263	.012	-2.58065	1.00636	-4.58115	-.58016	

From Table 3, it was showed that there is a significance difference ( $t = -2.71$ ,  $df = 209$ , two-tailed  $p = .007$ ) in social support between male ( $M = 31.51$ ,  $SD = 6.59$ ) and female ( $M = 34.09$ ,  $SD = 5.89$ ) among students. With the value of  $p < 0.05$ , the result of the significance is 0.007 which is smaller than the  $p$  value set. Thus, the null hypothesis is rejected where there is a significance difference between male and female in a public university. As can be seen, female students had a higher level of social support as compared to male students.

### Level of Social Support by First-Generation Students

To see if there is any difference in social support between the first generation students and non-first generation students in a public university, T-test is ran using SPSS. Table 4 showed the mean and standard deviation between the first generation students and non-first generation students in a public university.

Table 4

*Group Statistics of social support between first generation and non-first generation students in a public university*

	Are you a "first generation" student in your family?	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Total Social Support	No	132	33.6591	5.86987	.51091
	Yes	79	33.0127	6.65928	.74923

**Table 5**

*Independent Samples Test for social support between first generation and non-first generation students in a public university.*

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances				t-test for Equality of Means				
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Diff.	Std. Error Diff.	95% Confidence Interval of the Diff.	
								Lower	Upper	
Total	Equal variances assumed	2.538	.113	.736	209	.463	.64643	.87855	-1.08553	2.37840
Social Support	Equal variances not assumed			.713	148.312	.477	.64643	.90684	-1.14557	2.43844

Null Hypothesis is created as shown as below:

$H_0$ : There is no significance difference in social support between the first generation students and non-first generation students in a public university.

From Table 5, it is shown that there is no significance difference ( $t = .736$ ,  $df = 209$ , two-tailed  $p = .463$ ) in social support between first generation students ( $M = 33.66$ ,  $SD = 5.87$ ) and non-first generation students ( $M = 33.01$ ,  $SD = 6.66$ ) in a public university. With the value of  $p < 0.05$ , the result of the significance is 0.463 which is larger than the  $p$  value set. Thus, the null hypothesis is accepted because there is no significance difference between first generation students and non-first generation students in a public university.

## DISCUSSION

Overall, the level of social support among students a public university were quite high. This also showed that students in a public university averagely at least gain some social support from either their parents, peers of significant others. According to a previous research by Murphy et al, it showed that social support to higher education students in functioning as to help their transitions from school to work life. This is because individuals are not independent of the social circle; accordingly, the ability to cope with possible occupational concerns depends on situational variables such as social support (Weisenberg & Aghakhani, 2007).

The second finding from this study showed that the female students had a higher mean score of social support than the male students in a public university. There was a significance difference between the male and female students in a public university. Therefore, the hypothesis was rejected. On the other hand, there was no significance difference between the first generation and non-first generation among students in a public university. Therefore, the hypothesis for the first generation and non-first generation was accepted. Some studies directly and indirectly showed that the social support from the family, peers and significant others can really left a great impact on a student's growing process which compromises his or her adaptation skills, stress management and success.

In conjunction with that, support from friends, family and others should be readily available for the individual especially higher education students. It also showed the advanced nature of social support as well as both of the history of the connection with the individual who provides the supportive behaviour and the environmental context (Hobfoll & Vaux, 1993). Tam (2008) suggested that good relationships among siblings and parents indirectly would provide more social support. With this in mind, it can be assumed that good family functioning provides better social support. Thus, the contributions of social support from family appear more prominent than peers among adolescents in the Malaysian context.

## RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

This study measured the level of social support among students in a public university. Since this study a first effort at enhancing social support of students, continued research efforts are recommended. Firstly, future study may wider the sample of university students to all public university in Malaysia but not only in a public university. Furthermore, the

sample of subcategory in this study which is male and female can be increased to ensure the reliability of gender difference in emotional intelligence level. Second, the cross-sectional data was applied by the researcher. Future researchers could combine longitudinal designs to test causal inferences and to comprehend how these variables and their relationships change over time. A qualitative or experimental research design is suggested as well to decrease the social desirable way among respondents in answering the questionnaire in future studies.

Researcher focused on the variables which is social support. Thus, more social and contextual factors or including other variables should be continue to be explore by future researchers. For example, social support and career adaptability or social support and individual's mental health.

In short, this study had elaborated the research findings with more details. Also, previous researches that are related to social support had also been briefly discussed in order to figure out the consistency and inconsistency between previous researches and current research. Lastly, suggestions that have been raised and stated in this section can be used as a guide by the next researchers to obtain more comprehensive and precise research results on social support.

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