



Socioemotional Well-Being as a Predictor of Mental Health among Malaysian University Students

Implications for Southeast Asian Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

Mental health challenges among university students have become a pressing concern, particularly within higher education environments characterised by academic demands, social transitions, and sociocultural pressures. This study investigates the predictive role of socioemotional well-being (SEWB) in shaping mental health outcomes among university students in Malaysia. A quantitative, cross-sectional design was employed, involving 442 undergraduate students from higher education institutions. Socioemotional well-being was assessed using a multidimensional framework encompassing emotional regulation and social functioning, while mental health was measured using the Mental Health Inventory (MHI-38). Data were analysed using descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, and multiple regression analysis. The findings revealed a strong and significant positive relationship between SEWB and mental health ($r = 0.70$, $p < 0.05$). Regression analysis further demonstrated that SEWB is a significant predictor of mental health ($\beta = 0.70$, $p < 0.05$), explaining 48.9% of the variance ($R^2 = 0.489$), with the model achieving statistical significance ($F = 210.403$, $p < 0.05$). These findings underscore the critical role of socioemotional well-being as a key determinant of student mental health and highlight its potential as a strategic focus for intervention in higher education across Southeast Asia.

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Introduction

Mental health among university students has emerged as a significant global concern, particularly within higher education contexts characterised by increasing academic demands, social transitions, and uncertainty regarding future career pathways. Students are frequently exposed to multiple stressors, including academic workload, financial constraints, and challenges related to social adjustment, all of which may negatively affect their psychological well-being [5]. In Southeast Asia, these challenges are further shaped by sociocultural norms such as collectivist values, strong familial expectations, and persistent stigma surrounding mental health, which can influence emotional expression and help-seeking behaviours [1], [2].

In recent years, growing empirical attention has been directed toward identifying psychological factors that may serve as protective mechanisms against mental health problems among university students. One such factor is socioemotional well-being (SEWB), which refers to an individual's capacity to regulate emotions, maintain positive interpersonal relationships, and adapt effectively to environmental demands. SEWB encompasses both emotional functioning and social connectedness, making it a comprehensive indicator of psychological adjustment. Prior studies have demonstrated that higher levels of socioemotional well-being are associated with reduced symptoms of anxiety and depression, improved resilience, and better overall mental health outcomes [3], [4].

The role of socioemotional well-being is particularly important during the university years, a developmental period marked by increased independence, identity exploration, and exposure to diverse social environments. Evidence suggests that socioemotional competencies such as emotional regulation, empathy, and social support serve as protective factors that buffer individuals against psychological distress [3]. Conversely, deficits in socioemotional functioning are associated with heightened vulnerability to stress, burnout, and mental health disorders [5], [6]. These findings highlight the importance of examining SEWB not merely as a descriptive construct but as a predictive factor influencing mental health outcomes.

Within the Malaysian context, mental health issues among university students have become increasingly prominent. Recent studies have reported rising levels of stress, anxiety, and depression among students, largely driven by academic pressures and coping challenges [7], [8]. Cultural stigma surrounding mental illness, combined with high expectations for academic achievement, often discourages students from seeking professional help, thereby exacerbating psychological distress [2]. Moreover, urbanised and competitive environments further intensify these challenges, creating a complex interplay between individual, social, and cultural factors that influence student well-being.

Despite growing awareness of student mental health issues, there remains a limited body of empirical research examining the predictive role of socioemotional well-being within the

Southeast Asian context. Existing studies have largely focused on isolated psychological variables or descriptive assessments of mental health, with less emphasis on integrated models that position socioemotional functioning as a key determinant of mental health outcomes. This gap is particularly evident in regional contexts where sociocultural influences play a significant role in shaping psychological experiences and behaviours.

Therefore, this study aims to examine the role of socioemotional well-being as a predictor of mental health among university students in Malaysia. By providing empirical evidence on the relationship between SEWB and mental health outcomes, this study seeks to contribute to the existing literature by highlighting the importance of socioemotional functioning in understanding student well-being. Although the data are derived from Malaysian higher education institutions, the findings are expected to offer relevant insights for similar sociocultural contexts across Southeast Asia, including Indonesia, where comparable educational pressures and cultural dynamics exist.

The findings of this study are anticipated to inform the development of targeted interventions, institutional policies, and support systems aimed at enhancing socioemotional competencies and promoting mental health among university students. In doing so, this research contributes not only to academic discourse but also to practical efforts in strengthening student well-being within the broader Southeast Asian higher education landscape.

A. Background of Study

Mental health among university students has increasingly been recognised as a critical public health concern, particularly within higher education environments characterised by complex academic and psychosocial demands. Students are frequently exposed to a range of stressors, including academic pressure, financial constraints, and social adjustment challenges, which may contribute to adverse psychological outcomes such as stress, anxiety, and depression [5], [6]. Empirical evidence suggests that these psychological difficulties are prevalent among university populations and may negatively affect students' academic performance, interpersonal relationships, and overall quality of life.

In Malaysia, the situation reflects a similar pattern, with studies reporting rising levels of psychological distress among university students. Academic stress has been identified as one of the primary contributors to poor mental health outcomes, particularly when students lack effective coping strategies [6]. Furthermore, recent large-scale studies have highlighted the increasing prevalence of mental health issues among Malaysian undergraduates, reinforcing the need to examine factors that influence students' psychological well-being [7], [8]. These findings underscore the importance of identifying both risk and protective factors that shape mental health outcomes in higher education settings.

One important protective factor that has received growing attention is socioemotional well-being (SEWB). Socioemotional well-being refers to an individual's ability to regulate emotions, maintain positive social relationships, and function effectively within social environments. It represents a multidimensional construct that integrates emotional stability and social functioning, both of which are essential for adaptive psychological development. Within the context of higher education, SEWB plays a crucial role in enabling students to manage academic stress, build supportive relationships, and navigate developmental transitions associated with emerging adulthood.

It shows that students with higher levels of SEWB tend to exhibit lower levels of psychological distress, stronger emotional regulation, and more effective coping mechanisms [3], [4]. In contrast, individuals with poor socioemotional functioning are more vulnerable to mental health problems, including anxiety, depression, and burnout [5], [6]. These findings highlight the importance of socioemotional well-being as a key determinant of psychological resilience and mental health among university students.

Beyond individual psychological factors, sociocultural influences play a significant role in shaping mental health outcomes, particularly in Southeast Asian contexts. Cultural expectations related to academic achievement, emotional restraint, and family responsibilities may influence how students perceive and respond to psychological challenges. In many Asian societies, stigma surrounding mental health continues to act as a barrier to help-seeking behaviour, limiting students' access to appropriate support systems [1], [2]. This cultural dimension underscores the need to examine mental health within its broader sociocultural context rather than solely through individual-level factors.

Despite the growing body of literature on student mental health, there remains a limited number of studies that examine socioemotional well-being as an integrated predictor of mental health outcomes, particularly within the Malaysian and broader Southeast Asian context. Much of the existing research has focused on descriptive assessments or isolated psychological constructs, with less emphasis on understanding how socioemotional functioning influences mental health in a predictive framework. This gap highlights the need for empirical studies that adopt a more comprehensive approach in examining the role of socioemotional well-being in shaping students' mental health.

B. Statement of Problem

Mental health problems among university students have become increasingly prevalent, with growing evidence indicating high levels of stress, anxiety, and depression within higher education settings. In Malaysia, recent studies have reported substantial psychological distress among university students, largely driven by academic pressure, social adjustment challenges, and ineffective coping mechanisms [6], [7], [8]. These issues not only affect students' psychological

well-being but also have broader implications for academic performance, interpersonal functioning, and long-term life outcomes.

Despite the increasing recognition of mental health issues among university populations, existing research has predominantly focused on descriptive assessments of psychological distress or the examination of isolated variables such as stress, coping strategies, or emotional intelligence. While these studies provide valuable insights, they often fail to capture the complexity of students' psychological functioning as an integrated system. In particular, limited attention has been given to socioemotional well-being (SEWB) as a comprehensive construct that encompasses both emotional regulation and social functioning, despite its theoretical relevance in understanding mental health outcomes.

Furthermore, although previous research has established associations between socioemotional well-being and various psychological outcomes, there remains a lack of empirical studies that examine SEWB as a predictive factor of mental health within the Malaysian context. Much of the existing literature has emphasised correlational relationships or descriptive trends, rather than adopting a predictive analytical approach that can better explain how socioemotional functioning influences mental health outcomes. This limitation restricts the ability of researchers and practitioners to identify key mechanisms that can inform targeted interventions and prevention strategies.

In addition, the sociocultural context of Southeast Asia presents unique challenges that further complicate the understanding of student mental health. Cultural norms emphasising academic achievement, emotional restraint, and family obligations may influence how students experience and respond to psychological distress. Stigma surrounding mental health remains a significant barrier to help-seeking behaviour, limiting access to professional support and exacerbating mental health issues [1], [2]. Despite these contextual factors, there is still a scarcity of regionally grounded empirical research that integrates sociocultural influences with psychological constructs such as socioemotional well-being.

Therefore, there is a critical need to examine socioemotional well-being as a predictive determinant of mental health among university students within the Malaysian higher education context. Addressing this gap will not only enhance theoretical understanding of the relationship between socioemotional functioning and mental health but also provide practical insights for developing culturally relevant interventions and support systems. Although this study focuses on Malaysian university students, the findings are expected to offer valuable implications for similar sociocultural contexts in Southeast Asia, including Indonesia, where comparable educational pressures and cultural dynamics influence student well-being.

This study aims to examine socioemotional well-being (SEWB) as a predictive determinant of mental health among university students in Malaysia by adopting an integrated analytical

approach that captures the complexity of students' psychological functioning. Specifically, it seeks to analyze how socioemotional factors influence levels of psychological distress, including stress, anxiety, and depression. In addition, the study aims to address existing research gaps by moving beyond descriptive and correlational analyses toward a predictive framework that provides deeper explanatory insights. Furthermore, this research intends to incorporate sociocultural dimensions relevant to Southeast Asia, particularly cultural norms, stigma, and academic pressures, to better understand their role in shaping mental health outcomes. Ultimately, the study aims to generate evidence-based recommendations for developing culturally responsive interventions and support systems to enhance student well-being.

Methods

A. Research Design and Data Collection

This study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional research design to examine the predictive role of socioemotional well-being on mental health among university students. The study adopted an ex post facto approach, whereby variables were measured as they naturally occur without experimental manipulation. Data were collected from students enrolled in higher education institutions in Malaysia, particularly within the Klang Valley region. This setting was selected due to its high concentration of universities and diverse student population. A self-administered questionnaire was used to gather responses efficiently from a large sample. A total of 442 undergraduate students from various academic disciplines participated in the study. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were informed about the purpose of the study before data collection. Ethical considerations were observed, including confidentiality and anonymity of responses.

B. Instruments

The study utilised structured instruments to assess socioemotional well-being and mental health. Socioemotional well-being (SEWB) was measured using a multidimensional scale capturing emotional regulation, social functioning, and interpersonal relationship management. The construct was operationalised based on a socioemotional well-being framework developed in this study. Mental health was assessed using the Mental Health Inventory (MHI-38), a standardised instrument designed to measure psychological distress and psychological well-being, including dimensions such as anxiety, depression, and general mental functioning [9]. All items were measured using a Likert-type scale, with higher scores indicating higher levels of the respective constructs. Reliability and validity of the instruments were assessed before the main analysis.

C. Data Analysis

Descriptive analyses were conducted to provide an overview of the sample characteristics and key study variables. Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationship

between socioemotional well-being and mental health. Subsequently, multiple regression analysis was performed to determine the predictive role of socioemotional well-being on mental health outcomes. Model evaluation included analysis of variance (ANOVA), regression coefficients, and model summary indicators to assess the significance and explanatory power of the model. Statistical significance was determined at an appropriate confidence level, and analyses were conducted using standard statistical software.

Results

A. Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics were computed to summarise the characteristics of the study variables, including socioemotional well-being (SEWB) and mental health. The descriptive analysis of socioemotional well-being (SEWB) indicated moderate to relatively high levels across all constructs. Among the four dimensions, Situation recorded the highest mean score ($M = 3.45$, $SD = 0.68$), followed by Self ($M = 3.37$, $SD = 0.73$), Power ($M = 3.18$, $SD = 0.65$), and Status ($M = 3.00$, $SD = 0.69$). These findings suggest that respondents demonstrated stronger socioemotional functioning in situational adaptability and self-related aspects, while comparatively lower levels were observed in status-related perceptions.

For mental health, the descriptive results indicated moderate levels across all dimensions. Among the components, General Positive Affect recorded the highest mean score ($M = 3.63$, $SD = 0.75$), followed by Depression ($M = 3.56$, $SD = 0.95$), Life Satisfaction ($M = 3.54$, $SD = 0.59$), Loss of Behavior/Emotion Control ($M = 3.49$, $SD = 0.49$), Emotional Ties ($M = 3.44$, $SD = 0.97$), and Anxiety ($M = 3.35$, $SD = 0.88$). Overall, these findings suggest that respondents exhibited relatively positive psychological functioning, particularly in terms of positive affect and life satisfaction, while moderate levels of negative emotional states such as anxiety and depression were also present.

B. Correlation Analysis

Pearson's correlation analysis (Table 1) was conducted to examine the relationship between socioemotional well-being and mental health among university students.

Table 1. Correlation Matrix of Socioemotional Well-being and Mental Health Status

Variable	1	2
1. Socioemotional Well-being	—	0.70
2. Mental Health status	0.70	—

The results revealed a significant positive relationship between socioemotional well-being and mental health ($r = 0.70$, $p < 0.05$), indicating that higher levels of socioemotional well-being are associated with better mental health outcomes. This finding suggests that students who demonstrate stronger emotional regulation, social functioning, and interpersonal relationship

skills tend to experience lower psychological distress and higher levels of psychological well-being.

C. Regression Analysis

Multiple regression analysis was performed to assess the predictive role of socioemotional well-being on mental health.

Table 2. Multiple Regression Analysis Predicting Mental Health from Socioemotional Well-being

Model	R	R ²	Adjusted R ²	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	0.7	0.489	0.487	0.34849

The results indicated that socioemotional well-being significantly predicts mental health among university students ($\beta = 0.7$, $p < 0.05$). The model explained a substantial proportion of variance in mental health outcomes, with a coefficient of determination of $R^2 = 0.489$. This indicates that socioemotional well-being is an important determinant of mental health, contributing meaningfully to students' psychological functioning.

D. Model Significance (ANOVA)

The overall regression model was found to be statistically significant, as indicated by the ANOVA results ($F = 210.403$, $p < 0.05$). This suggests that the model provides a good fit for the data and that socioemotional well-being significantly contributes to explaining variations in mental health among the respondents.

Table 3. ANOVA Results for the Regression Model of Socioemotional Well-being Predicting Mental Health

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F
1	51.105	2	25.553	210.403
	53.315	439	0.121	
	104.42	441		

E. Summary of Findings

Overall, the findings demonstrate that socioemotional well-being is significantly associated with and predictive of mental health among university students. Higher levels of socioemotional well-being correspond to better mental health outcomes, highlighting its role as an important psychological resource in higher education contexts.

Discussion

The present study examined the role of socioemotional well-being (SEWB) as a predictor of mental health among university students in Malaysia. The findings revealed that socioemotional well-being is significantly associated with and predictive of mental health outcomes, indicating that students with higher levels of emotional regulation, social functioning, and interpersonal competence tend to experience better psychological well-being and lower levels of distress. These findings are consistent with broader empirical evidence demonstrating

that emotional intelligence and socioemotional competencies are strongly linked to psychological adjustment and well-being [9], [10].

This finding is consistent with previous studies that have highlighted the protective role of socioemotional competencies in mental health. Prior research has demonstrated that individuals with stronger emotional regulation abilities and supportive social relationships are better equipped to cope with stress and psychological challenges [3], [4]. Similarly, the present findings support the notion that socioemotional well-being functions as a key psychological resource that enhances resilience and reduces vulnerability to mental health problems such as anxiety and depression [5], [6]. Recent studies further confirm that social connectedness and emotional competence significantly buffer against depressive symptoms and psychological distress among university students [11], [12].

The significant predictive effect of socioemotional well-being observed in this study extends existing literature by demonstrating that SEWB is not merely associated with mental health, but also contributes to explaining variations in psychological outcomes among university students. While many previous studies have focused on isolated constructs such as stress or coping strategies, this study highlights the importance of examining socioemotional functioning as an integrated construct that encompasses both emotional and social dimensions. This finding aligns with emerging perspectives in psychological research that emphasise holistic and multidimensional approaches to mental health, including biopsychosocial and integrative well-being frameworks [13], [14].

Within the Malaysian context, the findings are particularly relevant given the increasing prevalence of psychological distress among university students [7], [8]. The results suggest that enhancing socioemotional well-being may serve as an effective strategy for improving students' mental health and overall functioning. Given the influence of academic pressure, competitive environments, and limited coping mechanisms, interventions that focus on emotional regulation, social skills development, and peer support may help mitigate the negative impact of these stressors. Empirical evidence from intervention-based studies also suggests that socioemotional learning (SEL) programs significantly improve students' mental health outcomes and academic engagement [15], [16].

From a sociocultural perspective, the findings also reflect the importance of considering contextual factors in understanding mental health within Southeast Asia. Cultural norms that emphasise emotional restraint, academic achievement, and family responsibilities may shape how students experience and manage psychological distress. In addition, stigma surrounding mental health continues to act as a barrier to help-seeking behaviour in many Asian societies [1], [2]. In this context, socioemotional well-being may play a critical role in enabling students to navigate these cultural expectations while maintaining psychological resilience. Cross-cultural

research further supports that cultural values significantly influence emotional expression, coping strategies, and mental health outcomes [17], [18].

Although this study was conducted within Malaysian higher education institutions, the findings have broader implications for similar sociocultural contexts across Southeast Asia, including Indonesia. Universities in the region face comparable challenges related to student mental health, including academic pressure, social transitions, and cultural stigma. Therefore, the emphasis on socioemotional well-being as a protective factor may provide valuable insights for developing culturally appropriate mental health interventions and support systems in regional higher education settings.

Implications and Limitations

A. Practical Implications

The findings of this study have several important implications for higher education institutions. First, universities should consider integrating socioemotional learning programmes into academic curricula to enhance students' emotional regulation and interpersonal skills. Second, institutional support services, such as counselling and peer support programmes, should be strengthened to promote socioemotional well-being among students. Third, awareness campaigns aimed at reducing stigma associated with mental health may encourage help-seeking behaviour and improve access to psychological support.

B. Theoretical Contribution

This study contributes to the existing body of knowledge by providing empirical evidence on the predictive role of socioemotional well-being in mental health within a Malaysian context. By conceptualising socioemotional well-being as an integrated construct, this study extends previous research that has primarily focused on individual psychological variables. The findings support a more holistic understanding of mental health that incorporates both emotional and social dimensions of psychological functioning.

C. Limitations and Future Research

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. First, the cross-sectional design limits the ability to establish causal relationships between socioemotional well-being and mental health. Future studies may employ longitudinal designs to examine changes over time. Second, the study was conducted within a specific geographical context (Malaysia), which may limit generalisability to other populations. Future research may explore similar relationships in different cultural settings, including Indonesia and other Southeast Asian countries. Third, reliance on self-reported data may introduce response bias, which should be addressed in future studies using mixed-method approaches.

Conclusion

This study examined the role of socioemotional well-being (SEWB) as a predictor of mental health among university students in Malaysia. The findings demonstrate that socioemotional well-being is both significantly associated with and predictive of mental health outcomes, indicating that students with stronger emotional regulation, social functioning, and interpersonal competencies tend to experience better psychological well-being and lower levels of distress. The study contributes to the existing literature by highlighting the importance of socioemotional well-being as an integrated construct that encompasses both emotional and social dimensions of psychological functioning. By adopting a predictive analytical approach, this research extends beyond descriptive assessments and provides empirical evidence on the role of socioemotional factors in shaping mental health outcomes among university students. From a practical perspective, the findings underscore the need for higher education institutions to prioritise socioemotional development as part of student support strategies. Interventions focusing on emotional regulation, social skills, and peer support may enhance students' resilience and overall well-being. In addition, efforts to reduce stigma surrounding mental health are essential to encourage help-seeking behaviour and improve access to support services. Although this study was conducted within the Malaysian context, the findings offer relevant insights for similar sociocultural environments across Southeast Asia, including Indonesia. Given the shared cultural values, academic pressures, and mental health challenges in the region, the emphasis on socioemotional well-being provides a useful framework for developing culturally responsive interventions in higher education. In conclusion, socioemotional well-being plays a critical role in understanding and improving mental health among university students. Strengthening socioemotional competencies may serve as a key strategy in promoting psychological resilience and supporting student success in higher education settings.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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