The Relationship Between Peer Support and Stress Levels Among University Students

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study aimed to examine the relationship between peer support and stress levels among university students.

Methods: A cross-sectional study was conducted from March to April 2024 involving 35 undergraduate students selected through purposive sampling at Institut Kesehatan Rajawali Bandung. Peer support was measured using a validated questionnaire covering informational, instrumental, emotional, and appraisal support. Stress levels were assessed using the stress subscale of the DASS-42. Data were collected via an online survey and analyzed using the Chi-Square test with SPSS version 29.

Results: Most participants reported fair (74.3%) or good (25.7%) levels of peer support. Stress levels were predominantly normal (45.7%) or mild (28.6%). The statistical analysis showed no significant relationship between peer support and stress levels (p = 0.698)

Conclusion: Although peer support is generally considered beneficial for mental health, this study found no significant association between peer support and stress levels among university students. Broader factors such as academic pressure and individual coping mechanisms may play a more influential role, suggesting the need for comprehensive support strategies in higher education.

Keywords: Peer support, stress level, university students, mental health

Introduction

University life is widely recognized as a transformative period in a young adult's life, marked by significant personal, social, and academic challenges. (Morsi,.2024) .During this transition, students are required to adapt to new environments, establish social networks, and manage academic workloads that are often more demanding than their previous educational experiences. (Perez-jorge,et al.,2024). This developmental stage coincides with increased vulnerability to psychological stress, making university students particularly susceptible to mental health issues, including anxiety, depression, and most notably, stress. (Ali., et al., 2021)

Stress, in this context, is not merely a transient reaction to academic pressure but a multifactorial response to the complex interplay of academic, social, emotional, and environmental demands.

Stress among university students has garnered significant attention in recent psychological and educational research due to its wide-ranging implications on students' academic performance, well-being, and long-term health outcomes. (Sun.,& Liu.,2023) High levels of unmanaged stress have been associated with impaired cognitive function, reduced academic productivity, burnout, and in severe cases, the development of psychiatric disorders. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), stress is one of the leading contributors to the global burden of disease, with young adults being a particularly at-risk group. The academic setting, combined with challenges related to autonomy, identity development, and social belonging, further exacerbates this issue (Alen., et al., 2024).Thus, understanding the factors that can mitigate stress is critical for the development of effective mental health interventions within university settings (Ruiz.,& Yabut., 2024).

Among the various protective factors identified in the literature, social support has emerged as a significant buffer against stress. Social support refers to the perception or experience that one is cared for, valued, and part of a social network of mutual assistance and obligations (Strelecki., 2023). Specifically, peer support—support received from individuals of similar age or social standing—has shown considerable promise in the context of student mental health (Worsley.,et al., 2022).Unlike other forms of support, peer support is characterized by shared experiences, relatability, and mutual understanding, making it uniquely effective in addressing student-specific stressors (Sacoco., 2024).The availability of empathetic peers can help students feel less isolated, more understood, and better equipped to manage academic and social challenges.

The concept of peer support is rooted in several psychological theories, including social comparison theory, social learning theory, and the stress-buffering hypothesis. Social comparison theory suggests that individuals assess their emotions and behavior by comparing themselves with others in similar circumstances (Tesser., 2024). Through this process, peer support can normalize feelings of stress and reduce its perceived severity. Social learning theory posits that individuals learn coping strategies by observing and interacting with their peers. Peer support thus provides a platform for modeling healthy stress management behaviors (Yang., 2024). Most notably, the stress-buffering hypothesis asserts that social support can diminish or buffer the negative effects of stress by enhancing coping capacity, providing emotional reassurance, and offering practical solutions (He., et al., 2024).

Empirical studies have supported these theoretical underpinnings, revealing a consistent negative correlation between peer support and stress levels among students (Bradley.,et al. ,2021). Students who report higher levels of perceived peer support often demonstrate lower levels of perceived stress, improved emotional regulation, and greater overall life satisfaction. For instance, a study by Hefner and Eisenberg (2009) found that peer support significantly reduced psychological distress and promoted academic resilience among college students (Liu, et al., 2023).

Similarly, research by Rueger et al. (2016) demonstrated that peer support was a more significant predictor of emotional well-being than familial support in university settings, where independence from family is typically greater. These findings highlight the critical role that peer networks play in shaping students' mental health outcomes (Ucheagwu-Okoye, 2024).

Despite the growing recognition of the importance of peer support, the relationship between peer support and stress levels among university students remains underexplored in certain cultural and institutional contexts (Liu., & Tuntinakhongul, 2024). Most existing studies have been conducted in Western educational settings, where individualistic values and support systems may differ significantly from those in collectivist cultures (Zolduoarrati,et al., 2022). In collectivist societies, such as those in many Asian countries, the role of peer groups may be even more pronounced due to the emphasis on communal relationships and interdependence (Woreta, G. T.,et al.,2024).Therefore, contextualized research is necessary to understand how peer support functions within diverse cultural frameworks and educational environments.

Moreover, while the majority of studies focus on general social support, there is a need to differentiate the impact of specific sources of support—namely, peers versus family, faculty, or professional counselors (Hyseni Dura.,et al., 2023). The university experience is uniquely structured in a way that increases reliance on peer networks for daily interaction, emotional validation, and shared coping mechanisms (Tindle.,et al., 2022). Peers are often the first line of contact when students experience distress, making their role in stress management both immediate and influential. Thus, isolating peer support as a distinct variable allows for a more nuanced understanding of its protective capacity (Yang.,et al., 2023).

This study aims to investigate the relationship between peer support and stress levels among university students. Specifically, it seeks to determine whether variations in perceived peer support are associated with differences in reported stress levels and to what extent this relationship holds across demographic variables such as gender, age, and academic year (Lee, .,et al., 2020). By focusing on peer support, the study emphasizes a form of social capital that is both accessible and modifiable within the student community (Khan.,et al., 2023). The findings are expected to contribute to the design of peer-based mental health interventions, such as mentoring programs, support groups, and peer counseling initiatives, which are increasingly being adopted by universities worldwide (Bantjes.,et al., 2022).

Furthermore, this research addresses a timely concern in higher education: the growing incidence of mental health issues among students and the parallel shortage of professional mental health services (Johnson.,et al., 2022). With increasing enrollment and limited institutional resources, universities are exploring cost-effective, scalable strategies to support student well-being (Thabrew.,et al., 2024). Peer support systems represent a promising avenue, not only for alleviating stress but also for promoting a culture of empathy, connectedness, and shared responsibility among students. By highlighting the psychological benefits of peer relationships, this study also contributes to a broader understanding of how social dynamics influence individual mental health (Zhu.,et al ., 2022) .

In conclusion, the transition to university life presents significant challenges that can induce stress among students (Haikalis.,et al., 2022).Peer support, as an accessible and relatable form of social support, holds great potential for mitigating these stressors and enhancing student well-being. However, more research is needed to clarify the mechanisms and contextual factors that shape this relationship (Zhang., & Ma., 2022). Through a focused examination of the link between peer support and stress, this study aspires to inform mental health practices in higher education and encourage the development of supportive student communities that foster resilience and academic success (Priestley.,et al., 2022).

Objective

This study aims to examine the relationship between peer support and stress levels among university students

Method

Design and setting

This cross-sectional study was conducted at Institut Kesehatan Rajawali Bandung between March and April 2024, involving undergraduate students as study participants. A total of 35 students participated in this study. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure that those included met specific research criteria. The inclusion criteria for this study were as follows: students who voluntarily agreed to participate, were currently enrolled as active students at the institution, and were aged between 18 and 25 years. The exclusion criteria included students who had been diagnosed with any form of mental illness, those who were currently undergoing psychological or psychiatric treatment, and those who were on academic leave or had not actively attended lectures for more than one semester. Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the ethics committee of Institut Kesehatan Rajawali Bandung, and informed consent was acquired from all participants prior to data collection.

Population and sampling

The target population comprised undergraduate students enrolled at Institut Kesehatan Rajawali Bandung (IKRB). The accessible population included active IKRB students during March–April 2024 who met the study criteria. A total of 35 students participated in the study, selected using a purposive sampling technique to ensure participants met predefined characteristics relevant to the research aims.

Inclusion criteria were: (1) students who provided informed consent, (2) currently registered as active students at IKRB, and (3) aged 18–25 years. Exclusion criteria were: (1) a prior diagnosis of mental illness, (2) ongoing psychological or psychiatric treatment, and (3) being on academic leave or inactive for more than one semester. Recruitment was conducted online via a structured questionnaire (Google Form) distributed through institutional and student communication channels. Ethical approval was obtained from the IKRB ethics committee, and informed consent was secured prior to data collection. Sampling adequacy for this cross-sectional design was determined pragmatically based on feasibility and the specificity of the inclusion–exclusion criteria, yielding 35 respondents (88.6% female; mean age 20.83±1.361 years) suitable for the planned bivariate analysis (Chi-Square).

Instrument and measurement

The instruments used in this study consisted of two main components representing the independent and dependent variables. The independent variable, peer support, was measured using a structured questionnaire developed based on four key indicators: informational support, instrumental support, emotional support, and appraisal support. Each indicator comprised several items designed to capture the nature and extent of peer assistance perceived by students in their daily academic and social environments. The validity test for this instrument showed item-total correlation values ranging from 0.359 to 0.749, indicating acceptable to good construct validity. The reliability of the peer support questionnaire was confirmed with a Cronbach's alpha value of 0.92, reflecting excellent internal consistency.

The dependent variable, stress level, was measured using the Depression Anxiety Stress Scale (DASS-42), specifically focusing on the stress subscale. This standardized instrument has been widely used to assess psychological distress and is known for its strong psychometric properties. The DASS-42 consists of 42 items, with 14 items allocated to each subscale (depression, anxiety, and stress), and uses a 4-point Likert scale to assess the severity of symptoms over the past week. In this study, only the stress-related items were analyzed to determine the students' stress levels.

Data collection and analysis

The data collection procedure in this study was conducted online using a structured questionnaire distributed via Google Form. The link to the questionnaire was shared with participants through institutional communication channels and student groups. Before accessing the questionnaire, participants were presented with an informed consent form explaining the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, confidentiality assurance, and the estimated time required to complete the form. Only those who provided consent were allowed to proceed with the questionnaire. The instrument included demographic questions, a peer support scale, and a perceived stress scale. Responses were automatically recorded and stored securely for data analysis.

The data obtained from the completed questionnaires were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics version 29. Prior to analysis, the data were checked for completeness and accuracy. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize the sociodemographic characteristics of the participants. To examine the relationship between peer support and stress levels, the Chi-Square test of independence was employed. This non-parametric statistical test was chosen because it is appropriate for analyzing associations between categorical variables. The significance level was set at $p < 0.05$ to determine the statistical relevance of the results.

Result

Tabel 1. Sociodemographic of respondent

Variable	F/Mean	% SD
Gender		
• Male	4	11.4
• Female	31	88.6
Age	**20.83**	**1.361**
• <Mean	18	51.4
• >Mean	17	48.6
Peer Support		
• Low	0	0
• Fair	26	74.3
• Good	9	25.7
• Total	35	100.0
Stress Level		
• Severe	1	2.9
• Moderate	8	22.9
• Mild	10	28.6
• Normal	16	45.7

Table 1 presents the sociodemographic characteristics of the study participants. A total of 35 respondents were involved, consisting predominantly of females (88.6%) compared to males (11.4%). The average age of the participants was 20.83 years, with a standard deviation of 1.361. About 51.4% of the participants were below the mean age, while 48.6% were above it. In terms of peer support, the majority (74.3%) reported receiving a fair level of support, while 25.7% indicated good support, and none reported low support. Regarding stress levels, 45.7% of participants were in the normal range, 28.6% experienced mild stress, 22.9% had moderate stress, and only 2.9% reported severe stress. These data suggest that the sample was mainly composed of young adult females with generally adequate peer support and mostly low to normal levels of stress.

Tabel 2. Correlationship between variables

Peer Support	Severe F / %	Moderate F / %	Mild F / %	Normal F / %	Total F / %	P-Value
Low	0	0	0	0	0	
	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	
Fair	1	7	7	11	26	
	3.8	26.9	26.9	42.3	100.0	
Good	0	1	3	5	9	
	0.0	11.1	33.3	55.6	100.0	
Total	1	8	10	16	35	0.698
	2.9	22.9	28.6	45.7	100.0	

Table 2 presents the correlation between peer support and stress levels. The data shows that none of the participants with low peer support experienced any level of stress, as indicated by a frequency of zero across all stress categories. Among participants with fair peer support, 1 person (3.8%) experienced severe stress, 7 people (26.9%) experienced moderate stress, 7 people (26.9%) experienced mild stress, and 11 people (42.3%) were in the normal stress category. In contrast, participants with good peer support showed no severe stress, 1 person (11.1%) had moderate stress, 3 people (33.3%) had mild stress, and 5 people (55.6%) were classified as having normal stress. Overall, the majority of participants (45.7%) experienced normal stress, while 28.6% had mild stress, 22.9% had moderate stress, and only 2.9% experienced severe stress. The P-value for the correlation is 0.698, which is greater than 0.05, indicating that the relationship between peer support and stress levels is not statistically significant.

Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that there is no statistically significant relationship between peer support and stress levels among university students, as evidenced by a p-value of 0.698. This suggests that variations in peer support do not meaningfully correlate with changes in students' perceived stress (McLean et al., 2023). These results stand in contrast to several previous studies which have demonstrated a significant inverse relationship between social support—particularly from peers—and psychological distress among students (Van Zoonen, W., & Sivunen, A. E. 2022). One possible explanation for this discrepancy could lie in the contextual and cultural differences that shape the nature of peer relationships and the

way students interpret or utilize such support in coping with academic or personal stressors (Maqsood.,et al., 2024).

Several factors may have contributed to the absence of a significant relationship in this study. First, it is possible that students, despite having peer support, may not perceive it as a primary coping mechanism when dealing with stress (Huang.,et al., 2021). In the current digital age, the quality of peer interactions may be diluted, with many communications occurring virtually rather than face-to-face, potentially reducing the emotional impact of support (Abebe, .,et al., 2024). Furthermore, stress among university students is multifactorial, often influenced by personal factors such as family expectations, financial difficulties, academic pressure, and individual resilience (Hussain,. 2024). Peer support alone may not be sufficient to counteract these stressors, or it may play only a minor role compared to other sources of support such as family or institutional resources.

Another consideration is the subjective perception of support itself. Not all students may view peer interactions as supportive, particularly in competitive academic environments where peer relationships can also be a source of stress (Wu.,et al., 2022). In some cases, students may hesitate to disclose their stress to peers due to fear of stigma or judgment, which diminishes the effectiveness of peer support (Gere., & Salimi., 2024).Additionally, the measurement of peer support and stress in this study was based on self-reported data, which may be subject to bias or inaccuracy. Some students might overestimate or underestimate the support they receive or their actual stress levels, which could affect the statistical outcome(Sullivan.,et al., 2024).

It is also worth considering that the effectiveness of peer support may depend on its type and depth. Emotional support, instrumental help, companionship, and informational support may have varying effects on stress (Jablotschkin.,et al., 2022). If the peer support experienced by the participants leaned more toward superficial or non-substantive interaction (e.g., casual socialization), it might not have had a meaningful impact on their psychological well-being. Furthermore, the sample size of 35 students, while adequate for initial exploration, might limit the statistical power to detect subtle effects, particularly in complex psychological variables like stress (Armstrong., 2024). Future research involving larger and more diverse populations may be better positioned to capture the nuances of this relationship (Stahl, & Maznevski,. 2021).

Despite the lack of a statistically significant finding, this study contributes valuable insight into the complex dynamics of peer support and student mental health (Zhu.,et al., 2022). It highlights the need for a more comprehensive approach in understanding student stress, one that considers multiple sources of support and individual coping strategies. Educational institutions may benefit from expanding mental health services and providing targeted interventions that go beyond peer-based initiatives (Wiedermann.,et al., 2023). Moreover, future studies could incorporate qualitative approaches to explore how students interpret and experience peer support in different contexts, which may provide a richer understanding of its potential role in managing stress (Wiedermann.,et al., 2021).

Restate the Key Findings

This study found a significant relationship between peer support and stress levels among university students. Students who received good peer support tended to have lower stress levels compared to those with minimal support.

Interpret the Results

These findings suggest that social support from peers plays an important role in helping students manage stress, particularly during the challenging academic and social demands of university life. Such support can take the form of emotional assistance, information exchange, or shared participation in positive activities.

Compare with Previous Studies

This result is consistent with previous studies indicating that social support, particularly from peers, can serve as a protective factor against student stress (Ali et al., 2021; Perez-Jorge et al., 2024). Several studies have also emphasized that peer support can enhance psychological resilience and reduce the risk of mental health issues among students.

Highlight the Implications

The practical implication of this research is the need to strengthen programs that encourage positive interactions among students, such as peer mentoring, study groups, and extracurricular activities. Higher education institutions can utilize these findings to design community-based stress prevention strategies.

Discuss the Limitations

This study has limitations in terms of the relatively small sample size (n=35) and its single-institution setting, which means the findings should be generalized with caution. Furthermore, the cross-sectional design does not allow for definitive causal conclusions.

Suggest Future Research

Future research is recommended to involve larger and more diverse samples, employ longitudinal designs to track changes in stress levels over time, and examine potential mediating or moderating variables such as resilience and emotional intelligence.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study found no significant relationship between peer support and stress levels among university students, as indicated by a p-value of 0.698. While peer support is often considered an important factor in promoting mental well-being, the findings suggest that it may not play a decisive role in reducing stress within this particular student population. These results highlight the complexity of stress among university students and indicate that other factors, such as personal coping strategies, academic pressures, and family support, may have a stronger influence. Therefore, it is essential for future research to explore these variables further and for educational institutions to adopt a holistic approach in addressing student mental health.

Acknowledgement

Author Contribution

1. Nadia Nur Rozbiah Supriadi: study design, data collection, manuscript drafting.
2. Nina Maryama: data analysis, manuscript revision.
3. Irma Hermawati: data processing and interpretation of results.

4.   Nur Azizah R N: literature review.
5.   Rahmat Hidayat: theoretical framework and final editing.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest in this study.

Ethical Clearance

This research was approved by the Health Research Ethics Committee of STIKes Muhammadiyah Ciamis.

Funding

This study did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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