RESEARCH ARTICLE

CORRELATES OF PERCEIVED SOCIAL SUPPORT AMONGST GRADUATE STUDENTS IN MALAYSIA

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to examine whether there are differences in social support dimensions of graduate students in terms of demographic profile. The number of participants was 534 graduate students (155 male and 379 female) randomly selected in one Malaysian university. The age of students ranged from 19 to 45; with mean age of 27.10. Apart from, applying descriptive statistic such as frequency, mean and, the data were statistically tested using a one way analysis of variance (ANOVA), through SPSS, version 19. The finding of this study displayed that there were significant differences in total social support, and its' dimensions such as family support and friend support across different faculties. The same result found for family among different races. Likewise, there was significant difference only in family support among various age groups. Furthermore, using t-test, significant differences observed across genders. In this regard, significant differences have established in total social support, family and friends. In addition, social support and significant others were significantly different in terms of marital status. However, there were no significant differences in social support of graduate students across different semesters, employment status and family sizes.

INTRODUCTION

From the viewpoint of the individual, the place in which the social interaction starts is family. With growth and development, the ndividual's social interaction expands towards his near environment. In the youth period, in addition to family interaction, the individual's interaction with his school environment and social environment created in that place begins to gain importance (Tan and Karabulutlu, 2005). Social support had been defined as a social network's provision of psychological and material resources intended to benefit an individual's ability to cope with stress (Atri and Sharma, 2006). For instance, students with strong support systems of family, friends, and significant others are likely to experience lower levels of stress and depression compared to those with weak social support. Freshman students who lack social support are vulnerable to loneliness (Wei, Russell, and Zakalik, 2005) and especially susceptible to depression. Tao *et al.* (2000) indicated that social support not only is one of the important resources for adolescents undergoing the transition to university, but also is one of the most important protective factors for undergraduates. In addition, for students who move away from home, the transition to university reduces contact and, likely support, from family as well as friends. Difficulties handling these stressors associated with the transition may lead to decreased academic performance and increased psychological distress (Benton *et al.*, 2003; Friedlander, Reid, Shupak, and Cribbie, 2007). Benton *et al.* (2003) found college students frequently have more complex problems today than they did over several years ago, including both the typical or expected college student problems, difficulties in relationships and developmental issues as well as the more severe problems, such as depression, sexual assault and thoughts of suicide. Social support has been shown to buffer individuals against

stress and depression (Cohen, 1984; O'Connor and Cassidy, 2007) and may protect freshman students' health when facing the challenges of the transition year in college (Brissette, Scheier, and Carver, 2002). A survey conducted by Fagg *et al.* (2008) researchers used national survey data for young adults in England to discover empirically the associations between social support perceived by persons aged between 16 and 24. The findings proposed that if families and friends could be useful to supply good social support, this might be beneficial for psychological well-being of young people in all types of settings. In addition, they displayed that better support at the individual level has relationship with significantly lesser risk of distress presented by participants. With respect to race, differences in level of social support Tate *et al.* (2006) showed there were no race-related differences (African American, White) in social support, and no race by social support interactions. In a study of college freshman, Maton *et al.* (1996) found that family support was more important among African Americans and peer support among Whites. Tong *et al.* (2004) examined whether there are differences in social support between Malay, Indian, Chinese. Participants were 243 male police patrol officers from the Singapore Police Force. Mean age of the respondents was 27.6 years which ranged from 19 to 51. It is interesting to keep in mind that Chinese participants indicated a higher number of social supports from non-family than family members whereas; the opposite was true for Indians and Malaysian. In addition, Malay took support from friend in addition to family.

Matthews, Stansfeld, and Power (1999) confirmed that the largest differences in social support are between females and males, with females better supported. According to Bíró, Ádány, and Kósa (2011) the lack of social support was a more prevalent problem among male students. Social support is also a potentially amenable determinant of mental health during higher education. owever, Gallicchio, Hoffman, and Helzlsouer (2007) carried out an investigation on relationship between gender and social support. In this study, 4,498 males and 6,948 females participated. Correlation

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analysis revealed that males reported significantly higher levels of social support than females. Zimet *et al*. (1988) conducted an investigation on social support. In this study 275 university undergraduates (136 women, 139 men) participated. Using ANOVA analysis showed that males and females are different in perceiving support. Females reported receiving significantly more support than males from significant others, friends and total social support. This study aims to explore whether there are significant differences in perceived social support and its' components based on students' demographic profile faculty, age, race, number of semesters of study, gender, marital status, employment status, family size among graduate students in one Malaysian University.

METHODOLOGY

A descriptive correlational research design was utilized in this study. In order to select the sample size, multi-stage sampling is applied. Because the researcher first selected higher-level sites (Uiniversiti), then randomly chose a lower stage (6 faculties in this case, namely Agriculture, Science, Engineering, Modern languages, Educational Studies, Medicine), and then at randomly chose classes in that stage. Finally, simple random sampling technique was used to select respondents from each of classes. In this study, researcher used Multidimensional Perceived Social support questionnaire in order to collect data (Zimet *et al*., 1988).This scale divided into three different components which are analyzed independently. The dimensions analyzed are: 1) family support 2) friend support 3) significant others. This measure contains 7 point format ranging from 1 (very strongly disagree) to 6 (very strongly agree). The 3 subscales included 12 items in totality. The subscale length is 4 items

Before doing actual study, a pilot study is conducted in order to test the reliability of the questionnaire in the novel circumstance. A total of 45 graduate students randomly selected from six faculties (Agriculture, Science, Engineering, Modern languages, Education, Medicine) in one Malaysian universiti, who are included part of actual study with the same character. It is important to note that this sample excluded from actual study. To evaluate the internal consistency of the three social support subscales, alpha coefficients were calculated for all respondents. It can be concluded that the alpha coefficients of the different subscales is excellent. The values were .91, .90 and .98 for family, friend, and significant others respectively. Reliability of perceived social support is ranged between .91 and .98. Since, according to Kline (2005) acceptability for internal consistency of reliability estimates coefficient of 0.90 excellent, 0.80 are very good, and 0.70 are satisfactory. Cronbach's coefficient alpha reported by Zimet (1988) for family support was .87, friend support .85, and significant others is .91. Reliability of social support is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Reliability of the Perceived Social Support Scale

Subscales	Current reliability	Reliability in previous study
Family	.91	.82
Friend	.90	.84
Significant others	.98	.96

Note: N = 534 youth adults (graduate students). Reliability is calculated depends on the outcome of the confirmatory factor analysis. Previous reliability is the Cronbach's alpha of the reliability of scale among medical students in University of Malaysia (Ng *et al*., 2010).

The social support scale consists of 12 items and three subscales specifically friends, Families, and significant others. Besides, each subscale includes four questions. Third, in spite of being a brief questionnaire, MSPSS assesses support from three sources and especially, the significant others (SO) subscale is significantly unique among other measurement in the field. Respondents are supposed to define who the ''significant other (s)''. Canty-Mitchell and Zimet (2000) discussed that the" significant other" subscale is an effective

complement to the family and the friend's subscales since it measures a distinctive source of support for the adolescents, namely boyfriend/girlfriend, teacher and counselor.

RESULTS

The sample consisted of 534 graduate students. Their age was between 19 and 45 years, with 155 male (29%) and 379 female participants (71%). Their mean age was 27 years (SD = 4.7). The investigation was presented as a research on contribution of cognitive emotion regulation, social support, and physical activity on psychological well-being. Participation has randomly been selected from six faculties (Agriculture, Science, Engineering, Modern languages, Educational Studies, Medicine) and different semesters of one Malaysian university. 380 (71.2%) of the students were in married and 151(28.3%) single status. The number of employed students was 202 (37.8) and the number of full time students was 332 (62.2). In addition, three races including Malay (380), Chinese (87) and Indian (63) participated in this study.

Goodness of fit Perceived Social Support Scale

Figure 1 shows Goodness of fit index (GFI) = .96, Adjusted GFI = .93, Root mean square residual (SRMR) or standardized RMR is .06, Root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = .06, Comparative fit index (CFI) = .98 and normed fit index or (NFI) is .97. In this study, P value is less than 0.05, DF = 48, χ^2 (CMIN) = 145.997 and CMIN/df = 3. Based on this, it is concluded that the model fits the data.
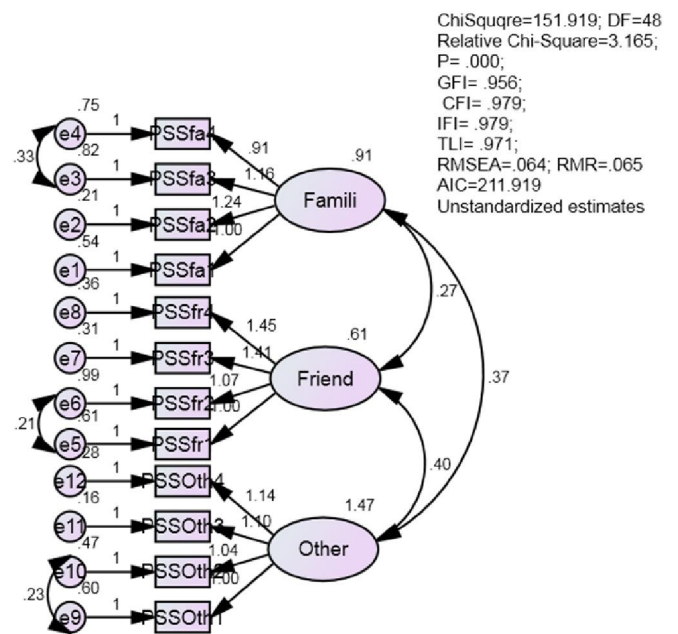

Figure 1. Measurement model of the Perceived Social support

Convergent and Discriminate Validity of Perceived Social Support Scale

Finding revealed AVE for all dimensions of perceived social support using Stats Tools Package Hair, Black, Babin, and Anderson (2010), for friend is (0.635), family (0.675), and significant others (0.834) which are higher than Maximum Shared Squared Variance (MSV) and Average Shared Squared Variance (ASV). Moreover, Average Variance Extracted (AVE) of items for three dimensions is higher than 0.50. It means discriminate and convergent validity of perceived social support questionnaire is high. Table 2 shows convergent and discriminate validity of social support.

Table 2. Convergent and Discriminate Validity of Perceived Social Support

Subscales	CR	AVE	MSV	ASV	Friend	Family	others
Friend	0.866	0.623	0.177	0.153	0.789		
Family	0.880	0.650	o.130	0.115	0.360	0.806	
Significant others	0.947	0.819	0.177	0.139	0.421	0.318	0.905

Comparison of Respondents' Perceived Social Support Components Based on Faculty

This objective was to investigate whether there were significant differences between the respondents' demographic profiles (gender, marital status, race, employment status, age, semester number, family size and faculties) and social support.

Differences in Perceived Social support Based on faculties

Comparing the social support and its' dimensions in terms of different faculties, the ANOVA analysis indicated that there were significant differences in the total perceived social support [F (5, 528) = 2.25, P = 0.03], dimensions of family support [F (5, 528) = 2.91, P = .009], and friends' support [F (5, 528) = 3.03, P = 0.007] among the participants from different faculties. The one-way ANOVA was also conducted to compare the difference between the respondents of different faculties in term of their perceived social support. The findings revealed that the mean scores for the respondents from the Faculty of Science in the total social support (M = 17.41, SD = 2.41), support from family (M = 5.99, SD = .87) and friends (M = 5.56, SD = .90) were significantly higher than those respondents from the Faculty of Modern Languages (M = 5.45, SD = 1.11), (M = 4.95, SD = 1.02), (M = 16.16, SD = 2.42) on the same variables, respectively as shown in Table 3 below.

Table 3. Differences in Perceived Social Support Dimensions in terms of Faculty

Levels	Faculty	N	Mean	F	Sig
Family support	Agriculture	76	5.93	2.91	.009
	Science	100	5.99		
	Engineering	81	5.80		
	Modern Languages	78	5.45		
	Educational	116	5.71		
	Studies	80	5.60		
	Medicine				
Friend support	Agriculture	76	4.45	3.03	.007
	Science	100	5.56		
	Engineering	81	5.40		
	Modern Languages	78	4.98		
	Educational	116	5.37		
	Studies	80	5.36		
	Medicine				
Significant others	Agriculture	76	5.90	.35	.88
	Science	100	5.58		
	Engineering	81	5.71		
	Modern Languages	78	5.73		
	Educational	116	5.80		
	Studies	80	5.73		
	Medicine				
Total social support	Agriculture	76	17.21	2.25	.032
	Science	100	17.41		
	Engineering	81	16.92		
	Modern Languages	78	16.16		
	Educational	116	16.87		
	Studies	80	16.73		
	Medicine				

N=534

Comparison of Students' Perceived Social Support Components across Age Group

The results of the ANOVA analysis revealed significant differences in family support [F (4, 529) = 3.55, P = 0.016] between the respondents

of different age groups. However, the respondents of different age groups were not significantly different in the total perceived social support [F (4, 529) = 1.37, P = .187], friend support [F (4. 529) = 1.20, P = .256] and significant others [F (4.529) = .52, P = .547]. The results of the Tukey's post-hoc comparison showed that the mean score for the respondents in the age groups of 24 to 28 years (M = 5.87, SD = 5.87) was significantly higher in terms of family support than that of the respondents in the age group of 29 to 33 years (M= 5.40, SD = 1.21) (see Table 4).

Table 4. Differences in Perceived Social Support Based on Age Group

Level	Age (years)	N	Mean	F	Sig
Family support	19-23	86	5.40	3.55	.016
	24-28	305	5.55		
	29-33	85	5.59		
	34-38	32	5.86		
	39 and above	26	5.86		
Friend support	19-23	86	5.39	1.20	.256
	24-28	305	5.41		
	29-33	85	5.18		
	34-38	32	5.51		
	39 and above	26	5.19		
Significant others	19-23	86	5.76	.52	.547
	24-28	305	5.70		
	29-33	85	5.85		
	34-38	32	5.96		
	39 and above	26	5.48		
Total social support	19-23	86	17.02	1.37	.187
	24-28	305	17.05		
	29-33	85	16.43		
	34-38	32	17.02		
	39 and above	26	16.26		

Differences in Perceived Social Support Dimensions by Race

The one-way ANOVA analysis indicated that the respondents of different races were significantly different in their family support [F (2, 531) = 3.52, P, .049]. However, there were no significant differences in the total perceived social support [F (2.531) = 2.51, P = 0.097], friend support [F (2.531) = 3.146, P = .12], significant others [F (2.531) = 1.48. P = .27] among the respondents of different races. The Tukey HSD Multiple comparison results across the races demonstrated a higher mean score for the Malay students (M = 5.83, SD = 1.06), compared to Chinese students (M = 5.48, SD = 1.22) (see Table 5)

Table 5. Differences in the Perceived Social Support by Race

Levels	Race	N	Mean	F	Sig
Family support	Chinese	87	5.47	3.52	.049
	Indian	63	5.73		
	Malay	384	5.82		
Friend support	Chinese	87	5.35	3.146	.123
	Indian	63	5.06		
	Malay	384	5.42		
Significant others	Chinese	87	5.56	1.48	.272
	Indian	63	5.89		
	Malay	384	5.81		
Total social support	Chinese	87	16.39	2.51	.097
	Indian	63	16.69		
	Malay	384	17.06		

Differences in Perceived Social Support in terms of Genders

The independent sample t-test was performed to compare the scores for the dimensions of perceived social support between the male and female respondents. Based on the data presented in Table 6, the total social support for the male respondents is (M = 16.41, D = 2.55) and females (M = 17.11, SD = 2.65) (t = -2.86, P < 0.05), for family support between the males (M =5.56, SD =1.16) and females (M = 5.83, SD = 1.08) (t = -2.46, P < 0.05), as well as for friends' support

between the males (M = 5.23 , SD = .97) and females (M = 5.42, SD = 1.06) (t = -2.05, P < 0.05). However, no significant difference was reported for the support of their significant others for males (M = 5.61, SD = 1.33) and females (M = 5.85, SD = 1.34) (t = -1.87, P > 0.05).

Table 6. Gender Differences in the Perceived Social Support Components

Levels	Gender	Mean	STD	t	Sig
Family	Male	5.56	1.16	-2.46	.015
	Female	5.83	1.08		
Friends	Male	5.23	.97	-2.05	.041
	Female	5.42	1.06		
Significant others	Male	5.61	1.33	-1.87	.062
	Female	5.85	1.34		
Total Social support	Male	16.41	2.55	-2.86	.005
	Female	17.11	2.65		

N (Male) = 155   N (Female) = 379

Comparison of Students' Perceived Social Support Components across Marital Status

The scores for theperceived social support and its dimensions between the respondents of different marital status were also compared using the independent samples t-test. The findings showed that there were significant differences in the total social support for single (M = 16.74, SD = 2.74) and married respondents (M = 17.37, SD = 2.30) (t = -2.70, P < 0.05),as well as in significant other between the single (M =5.65, SD = 1.42) and married respondents (M = 6.14, SD = 1.02) (t = -4.47, P < 0.05), as shown in Table 7 below.

Table 7. Differences in Perceived Social Support Based on Marital Status

Levels	Marital status	Mean	STD	t	Sig
Family	Single	5.73	1.14	-1.02	.32
	Married	5.83	1.05		
Friend	Single	5.35	1.07	-.33	.75
	Married	5.39	.98		
Significant other	Single	5.65	1.42	-4.47	.000
	Married	6.14	1.02		
Total social support	Single	16.74	2.74	-2.70	.007
	Married	17.37	2.30		

In addition, the findings of this study did not yield any significant differences in the perceived social support of the students across the faculty, age, family, number of semester and employment status.

DISCUSSION

According to the results of this study, significant differences were observed in the perceived social support and its' components such as family and friend support across the faculties. Based on the present findings, it can be concluded that the respondents from the Faculty of Science obtained more total social support, family and friends support compared to those from faculty of Modern Languages. According to Yetim, U. (2003), university students have relatively lower levels of collectivism compared with other groups. This can be related to the fact that they are mostly influenced by the university context, which is liberating and autonomous. However, it can be argued that graduate respondents from the Faculties of Modern Languages are perhaps more individualistic than those from the Faculty of Science. In this study, differences were found in the family support among different age groups. In other words, the age groups of 34 and 38 years and 35 above received more family support than those in the other age groups. On the other hand, the least support from family was found for those in the age group of 19 and 23 years. The finding of the present study is inconsistent with that of Tan and Karabulutlu (2005), who believed that family support is important among youth. This is supported by Fagg *et al*. (2008), who claimed the benefits of social

support might be viewed as a kind of family 'resilience.' It provides for some persons social resources that aid them to challenge relatively well with the difficulties they encounter in their context of residence. However, family support is supposed to be most trusted among youth mature graduates than those who are not mature. According to the results, there are differences in the family support among the three races, namely, Malay, Chinese and Indian. The Malay students obtained the most support from the family, followed by the Indians and then the Chinese. The finding of present study is in line with that of Tong *et al*. (2004), who seem to propose that collectivistic approaches are a function in both in-group types and ethnicity (Uleman *et al*., 2000). However, taking social support from family among the Malay might be because of the high level of positive relationships with others among the graduate students.

The findings of the current study displayed that males and females differed in terms of getting total social support as well as friend and family supports. Obviously, female students took more total social support, family and friends support than male students in this sample. The result of present study is in line with the studies by several authors such as Bourque, Pushkar, Bonneville, and Béland (2005), Clarke, Marshall, Ryff, and Rosenthal (2000), Kawachi and Berkman (2001) and Zimet *et al*. (1988). As asserted in all these studies, women are receiving significantly greater supports than men from significant others, from friends and total social support. The reason might be that males have a tendency to keep less emotional relationships and are less embedded in their social networks, hence, needing less overall social support (Berkman, 2001; Bourque *et al*., 2005). In contrast with Gallicchio *et al*. (2007) and Matthews *et al*. (1999), it can be argued that participation in social networks maybe more harmful than helpful for women with low resources, who often face greater difficulty in responding to the needs of network members (Belle, 1987). Therefore, differences in the social support between the two genders perhaps depend on personality trait differences of men and women and also the resources provided by graduate students and society. Thus, the most important point is conscious use of congruent resources by the graduates. Based on the results of this study, married and single students were significantly different in the total perceived social support and significant others. Accordingly, married students took more total perceived social support and significant others than single students. The findings of this survey are in line with that of Cotton (1999), Burman and Margolin (1992), Gove *et al*. (1983), and Islam (2004), who found that total perceived social support is more beneficial for married students. However, based on creative coping strategies (Wong and Wong, 2006), people can create relational resources in order to increase their social networks, regardless of their marital status. In this study, married respondents were not supported by their family, and this fact needs to be highlighted because satisfaction and the support associated with such a relationship are necessary for well-being (Holt-Lunstad, Birmingham, and Jones, 2008). However, it can be argued that the quality of relations is perhaps a restriction in getting support from family. On the other hand, no significant difference was seen in the social support of the students in terms of family size, semester of study and employment status.

Conclusion

Based on findings of current study, in terms of faculties, students from faculty of modern languages took the least perceived social support from family and friendwhile, students of science took the highest total social support, family and friend support. Likewise, the age groups between 34 and 38 years and 35 and above perceived more family support than those in the other age groups. Whereas, the least support from family was found for age between 19 and 23. In this sample is observed that with increasing age, taking family support of students is increased. Malay students took more social support from family compared with other races. With respect to gender, females took more total social support, family, and friends, than femalesin

presentstudy. Married students took more total perceived social support and significant others than single students. On the other hand, there were no significant differences in social support of students in terms of family size, number of semester, and employment status.

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