

A Study of Gender Differences on Stress and Emotional Intelligence

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ABSTRACT

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There are some stereotypes attached on both male and female genders regarding their emotional states and taking stress i.e. females are considered to be emotionally more expressive whereas, males to be emotionally cool and stable. The present study aims to explore if this difference exists in the academic field of postgraduate level. Thus, this research determines; (1) the differences between male and female postgraduate students' level of stress and emotional intelligence (EI) as the coping strategies; then (2) the significance of gender difference in EI and stress, particularly, among UTM Perdana School students. According to the findings, the female students are found to perceive slightly higher stress compared to male respondents, but male students are found to have greater EI in managing their stress compared to female respondents. However, the difference was insignificant as the reasons could be situational or biological reason rather than gender differences.

Keywords:

Stress, emotional intelligence, gender difference, postgraduate students

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1. Introduction

People choose to pursue postgraduate study as career advancement or personal's intellectual challenge. Postgraduate study can be challenging, time consuming and tough sometime. Being a postgraduate student is different from being an undergraduate student. It requires more independence skills and self-initiative because they have to plan, organize, and structure their own learning. For some people, pursuing postgraduate study is also a life challenging; they have to deal with high workload, deadlines, presentation, finances, exams, research, and perhaps living in a new town away from family and friends. Therefore, university life can be stressful, as stress occurs when the demand are greater than the ability to cope.

According to Khan et. al., [22], stress can positive or negative. The right kind of stress may encourage the student towards change and growth. However, too much stress may affect their physical and mental health problems, reduce their self-esteem and may affect their academic achievement [12]. A postgraduate student must overcome their stress in order to successfully

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graduate. Emotional intelligence (EI) is one of the coping strategies to handle stress. EI enables people to recognize their own, and other peoples' emotions that help them to make appropriate choices for thinking and action [10].

Each postgraduate student may experience stress and react to stress at different levels. It also may differ across gender. A lot of studies have been done to discuss about gender differences in perceptions of stress [17,3]. However, less is known about differences in handling stress with EI when comparing the male and female postgraduate students. Therefore, the specific aims of this study were; (1) to determine differences in stress levels and in EI as the coping strategies among male and female postgraduate students; and (2) to determine whether or not the differences is significant across the different gender. It is hypothesized that there will be differences in gender analysis.

1.1 Stress and Stressors

A report by American College Health Association (ACHA) indicated that approximately half of students reported to have more than average or tremendous stress in 2014 [8]. Postgraduate student are expose to different kind of stressors such as peer pressure, expectation, difficulty prioritizing, competition, freedom, family, job and relationship.

A study by Gazder *et al.*, [6] suggested that major stressors affecting postgraduate students were academic and performance related pressures. It also suggested that work overload and pressure to complete given tasks, mostly within tight timelines contribute to high levels of stress. Another factor was self- perception. As what has been discussed in a study by Bedewy and Gabriel [2], self- perception refers as academic self-confidence and confidence for success as a student, in future career and confidence in making the right academic decisions. As Stress is considered to be a part of postgraduate students' life, it is important to a have the ability to manage feelings and handle stress through EI as the coping strategy to success in academic life.

1.2 Emotional Intelligence (EI) as a Coping Strategy

The higher level of studies requires higher level of intelligence equally among male and female students. It can be in terms of perception, attention, positivity, punctuality, mental soundness, adjustability, selection of appropriate learning methodology or good problem-solving ability [18]. Such a management is entirely a product of a stable emotional balance of a student. Involvement of emotional balance broadens the aspect of study towards personal life rather than academic life only. The home affairs and family matters are among the main factors in providing emotional stability in a person. It implies to stabilizing the ups and downs of stress level as a result of fluctuations in personal or educational walks of life. Therefore, in the case of post-graduation level of education, the key to emotional intelligence is proven to be associated with personal life and academic life, as well as the amount of stress affecting their emotional balance [18].

EI is a different way of being smart [16]. Being emotionally intelligent is a common mental capability for men and women to reason, plan, comprehend, solve problems, learn from experience, and make decisions, in order to achieve their short-term as well as long-term objectives of life. Its importance is well-established in the lives of both male and female students [7]. In pursuing higher education, time management skills and selective study is required by the student to a great deal to accomplish the given tasks in time. All it needs is more smart work rather than only hard work. EI is defined as:

“The ability to perceive accurately, appraise, and express emotion; the ability to access and/or generate feelings when they facilitate thought; the ability to understand emotion and emotional knowledge; and the ability to regulate emotions to promote emotional and intellectual growth”.

EI is generally studied in two main domains, which are Trait-Based EI and Ability-based EI. Trait-based EI is the self-perception of a person that how emotionally intelligent he/she believes himself/herself to be. Whereas, ability based EI is the actual giftedness of a person to be emotionally intelligent, equipped with emotion-related knowledge and reasoning to cope with a particular situation. Both the trait-based and ability-based EI are equally significant and complement each other in shaping up the collective emotional intelligence of a person.

1.3. Gender Differences in Stress and EI

It is a presumption that female tend to perceive more stress other than male. Male and female are exposed to different types of stress and deal with it based on cultural norms (Calvarese, 2015). It is suggested that females are more stressed by their environment, their nature emotions and family ties [15]. They experience stress as they combine the demands of study while trying to spend more time for friends and family. Madhan *et al.*, [5] also suggested that the female students had a higher level of depression symptoms than their male counterparts. Furthermore, as women, they tend to be more emotionally involved of those around them especially in social and family networks hence affect their stress [13].

On the hand, Pourrajab *et al.*, [17] and Zamirullah *et al.*, [22], revealed that male students are much more stressful than female students. Furthermore, Calvarese [3], in her study suggested that there were significant differences between males and females concerning their reactions to stress. In contrast, Kania [9], and Par *et al.*, [15] indicated that there are no significant relationships between gender and perceived stress ($p > 0.05$).

In studying the emotional intelligence, we come to know that demographic attributes like gender, family structure, social status, result in difference in EI of a student. The male and female differ in the EI because the society grooms the two genders differently. Generally, the male students are believed to be higher in EI but females have greater abilities in social responsibility, intra-personal relationships, social skills and empathy [1]. Interestingly, the female gender is perceived as the emotional gender. They are stereotyped as intensely expressive in their own emotions. Due to their sensitivity, they recognize emotions better and have greater empathy towards others and greater ability in intrapersonal skills [19].

On the other hand, men are generally perceived to be dominant over their emotions like fear, guilt, pain, or vulnerability. Hence, they can better manage stressful situations by being more adaptive and assertive. Men are generally not given room to express their emotions in a society and are considered as emotionally stronger and presiding beings. The present study will examine these perceptions about male and female postgraduate students in the two domains of EI, which are trait-based and ability-based, as, discussed above. The difference in stress and EI will be analyzed between both genders whereas; the academic environment, facilities, opportunities and the overall training and educating process will remain same for both genders.

Research in perceived stress is particularly important because of its high prevalence among postgraduate students. More so, more research need to been done to fully comprehend on how EI plays the important role in managing the stress and how it differ across gender. Thus, this study is to describe prevalence of stress and emotional intelligence and how it differs across genders among the postgraduate students of Perdana School of Science, Technology and Innovation, University Technology Malaysia (UTM).

2. Methodology

2.1 The Participants

A quantitative survey using a case study approach was conducted on postgraduate students studying in Perdana School, University Technology Malaysia. There were 81 postgraduate students in Perdana School. All of them were requested to answer the questionnaire that measures “stress and emotional intelligence” however the participation was on voluntary basis.

2.2 The Questionnaire

The questionnaire was prepared on basis of an initial literature review regarding stress, conflict, and management process. An adapted version of the Student Stress Scale [4] was used to measure academic obstacles. Similarly, Schuette emotional intelligence scale [14] and Goleman’s Emotional Intelligence [21] were used to determine the emotional intelligence among the male and female postgraduate students. The questionnaire contained questions, which were Likert-type responses, and close ended questions. The stress section in the questionnaire dealt with eight stressors (consist of 27 items) affecting postgraduate students. The eight stressors analysed were academic workload, performance pressure, self- esteem, time management skills, relationship with lecturers/supervisors, relationship with colleagues, university facilities and study and personal life balancing. On the other hand, the emotional intelligence section constituted of questions to gauge the level of EI among the postgraduate students within the two main domains of EI; Ability-Based EI and Trait-Based EI.

2.3 Data Collection

The data has been collected through online survey, disseminated via emails and links on WhatsApp and social networking sites. The online survey is a convenient way to gather data, since respondents can choose themselves the appropriate time for answering. The online survey provides quick response and large and easy coverage of respondents due to the reach of Internet and smart phones now days.

2.4 Statistical Analysis

Data analysis was performed using SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences) version 24. Descriptive analysis was conducted to describe the demographic background of the respondents. Dichotomous variables were expressed as frequencies and percentages. Continuous variables for stress and EI were expressed as means and standard deviation. The independent t- tests analysis was used to determine whether there is a significant difference between the means stress and EI across gender or not. P value less than 0.05 were taken as significant. All the results obtained are presented in tables and graphs and are accompanied by descriptions explaining the results. Then, discussion of the results is carried out in order to drawn necessary conclusion, based on the findings of the research.

3. Results

3.1 Demographic Profile

A total of 81 postgraduate students at UTM Perdana School were contacted to answer this online survey via email and WhatsApp application. A number of 44 students were responded to this study (54%). Since the participation was on voluntary basis, the sample relied on the availability and willingness of students to respond and participate. As shown in Figure 1, the sample included more female participants (59.1%, n = 26) than male participants (40.9%, n = 18).

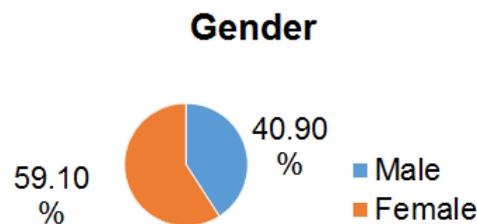


Fig. 1. Respondents' Gender

Table 1 presented the descriptive statistics of the respondents. The majority of respondents were in the age group of between 30 – 39 years and it dominated by the female postgraduate students (n=19).

Table 1

Demographic information of respondents across in different gender
 (n Male = 18, n Female = 26, N= 44)

Profile	Male		Female		
	n	%	n	%	
Age	≤ 29	0	0	3	6.8
	30 – 39	9	20.5	19	43.2
	40 – 49	8	18.2	4	9.1
	≥ 50	1	2.3	0	0
Nationality	Malaysian	16	36.4	21	47.7
	Non- Malaysian	2	4.5	5	11.4
Marital Status	Single	3	6.8	6	13.6
	Married	15	34.1	20	45.5
	Others	0	0	0	0
Religion	Muslim	16	36.4	24	54.5
	Christian	1	2.3	2	4.5
	Hindu	0	0	0	0
	Buddha	1	2.3	0	0
	Other (Please specify)	0	0	0	0
Education Level	Master (taught course)	9	20.5	19	43.2
	Master (by research)	3	6.8	0	0
	PhD	6	13.6	7	15.9
Mode of study	Full- time student	12	27.3	20	45.5
	Part- time student	6	13.6	6	13.6

Among the respondents, 36% are male and 47.7% female. Majority of the respondents are Malaysians (84%), and out of them 36.4% are male and 47.7% are female. Among total overseas students, 4.5% are male and 11.4% are female. 43.2% of the female respondents are currently pursuing their degree in Master by taught course, while the rests (15.9%) are pursuing their PhD degree. While in male respondents, 20.5% Master by taught course, 6.8 Master by research and 13.6% are PhD. 12 of the male postgraduate students are a full- time student while the other 6 were studying at part- time basis. On the hand, 20 female postgraduate students are a full- time postgraduate students and the part- time are 6. In total, most of postgraduate students are Muslim and majority the age falls in between 30 – 49 years old.

3.2 Manifestation of Stress in Gender Difference

The survey explored 8 possible sources of stress spanning academic workload, performance pressure, self- esteem, time management skills, relationship with lecturers /supervisors, relationship with colleagues, university facilities and study-personal life balancing. All 8 main stressors were found to have a direct impact to the postgraduate students (Table 2). The intensity of it is diagrammatically represented in Figure 2.

According to data as presented in Table 2, the levels of stress are vary among different gender. From the listed main stressors, female postgraduate students experienced more stress compared to male postgraduate students as higher score of means were found in 7 out of 8 of the main stressors. The intensity of stress and the different in gender is diagrammatically presented in Figure 2. While male postgraduate students tend to have more stress in time management skills with the mean score of 3.70 slightly higher from the mean scored by the female postgraduate students.

Table 2

Manifestation of stress among postgraduate students in different gender according to the main stressors

Stressor	Male		Female	
	M	SD	M	SD
Academic workload	3.57	1.003	3.81	0.605
Performance pressure	3.78	1.023	4.01	0.650
Self- esteem	3.35	1.019	3.41	0.896
Time management skills	3.70	0.935	3.60	0.952
Relationship with lecturers/ supervisor	2.75	1.036	3.09	1.113
Relationship with colleagues	2.67	0.996	2.95	1.125
University facilities	2.90	0.670	2.96	0.833
Study-personal life balancing	3.64	1.304	3.86	0.955

M = Mean

SD = Standard Deviation

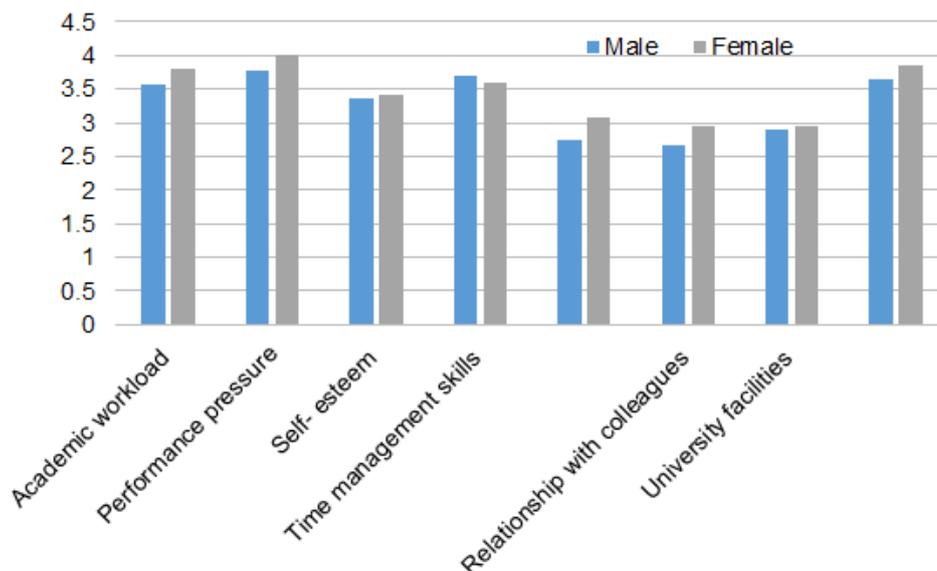


Fig. 2. The intensity of stress in different genders

List of all stressors and the differences in gender are given in Table 3. A detail analysis shows that the primary stressor for currently enrolled postgraduate students in Perdana School was the performance pressure related stressor. In response to that, female postgraduate students have the same score of means (both 4.08) in stressors related to viva and presentation, and test and examinations. While the male postgraduate students scored 3.89 and 3.72 in both categories respectively, slightly lower than the female respondents.

Even though Figure 2 showed that female postgraduate students seem to have more stress compared to male students, male students also perceived slightly higher score stress in language competency, lack of time to review what has been learnt, meeting deadlines and working with incompetent colleagues (Table 3). This may be attributed by work overload and short duration given to complete a task.

Post-graduate studies require a long-term collaboration between a student and lecturers or supervisors. Supervising and guiding by the supervisors and lecturers to their students will lead them to success. Having a close relationship with will also help to stimulate the development and learning experience. Furthermore, a strong relationship that develops between a student and lecturers or supervisors may also result in the establishment of a strong network in the future. Of all the stressors, relationship with lecturers or supervisors seems to have less stress impact on students.

3.3 Manifestation of Emotional Intelligence in Gender Differences

The survey findings about emotional intelligence (EI) among male and female postgraduate students in Perdana School, UTM are depicted in Table 4. The male students are found to be slightly higher in EI than female students supported with the findings that emotional intelligence of male students is 4.17 and that of female students is 3.95.

Table 3
 The relation between stress and gender

Stressor	Male		Female	
	M	SD	M	SD
Academic workload				
The amount of material to study	3.44	1.338	3.69	1.050
Difficulty in understanding material/ content	3.39	1.243	3.81	0.801
Doing research (for research project or assignments)	3.61	1.145	3.88	0.766
Writing assignments/ thesis	3.83	1.043	3.85	0.784
Performance pressure				
Meeting the demand from lecturers/supervisors	3.72	1.074	3.88	0.864
Presentations/ Viva	3.89	1.132	4.08	1.055
Tests/ Examinations/ Assessments	3.72	1.074	4.08	0.628
Self- esteem				
Language competency	3.50	1.098	3.00	1.131
Fear of making serious mistakes	3.28	1.227	3.50	1.273
Worrying about grades or achieving milestones	3.28	1.320	3.73	1.116
Time management skills				
Lack of time to review what has been learnt/ studied	4.00	1.029	3.62	1.169
Meeting deadlines for assignments/ progress reports	3.94	1.110	3.88	1.033
Not being able to effectively manage time	3.17	1.339	3.31	1.192
Relationship with lecturers/ supervisors				
Lack of support from lecturer/ supervisor	2.78	1.353	2.85	1.347
Lack of communication from lecturer/ supervisor	2.61	1.335	2.96	1.280
Understanding the expectations of lecturers/ supervisor	3.22	1.114	3.58	1.102
Difficulty in maintaining relationship with lecturers/ supervisor	2.39	0.979	2.96	1.248
Relationship with colleagues				
Working with uncooperative colleagues	2.83	1.425	3.12	1.243
Working with incompetent colleagues	3.11	1.278	3.00	1.200
Relationship problems with colleagues	2.11	0.963	2.88	1.336
Competition among colleagues	2.61	0.979	2.81	1.201
Universities facilities				
Inconvenient timetabling	2.72	1.074	3.31	1.258
Availability of the academic materials in library	3.00	1.372	3.12	1.177
Availability of campus facility	3.11	1.132	2.88	1.107
Social life in campus (sports/ clubs)	2.78	1.166	2.54	0.811
Study-personal life balancing				
Dealing with family responsibility	3.67	1.455	3.85	0.881
Juggling work, study and personal life (life balancing)	3.61	1.243	3.88	1.143

Table 4
 Emotional Intelligence of male and female postgraduate students

Emotional Intelligence (EI)	Male		Female	
	M	SD	M	SD
	4.17	0.51	3.95	0.65

Table 6
Cross-tabulation of Ability and Trait-Based EI among male and female students of UTM, Perdana School

Domains of EI	Male		Female	
	M	SD	M	SD
Ability-Based EI	4.17	0.481	3.96	0.672
Trait-Based EI	4.18	0.583	3.94	0.674

Table 7
Manifestation of Emotional Intelligence among male and female postgraduate students

Emotional Intelligence (EI)	Male		Female	
	M	SD	M	SD
Ability-Based EI	4.17	0.481	3.96	0.672
I have control over my emotions.	4.50	0.514	4.04	0.774
I have the strength to cope with any challenges.	4.33	0.594	3.92	0.884
When I feel difficulty in my educational activities, I remember times I faced similar obstacles and overcame them.	4.17	0.618	3.88	0.835
I expect that I will do well on most of the tasks I am assigned.	4.33	0.686	3.77	0.940
I motivate myself by imagining good grades to academic tasks I am given.	4.00	1.085	3.62	1.075
I can learn from my mistakes and do better next time.	4.28	0.575	4.04	0.905
When I am in a positive mood, I can perform in a more creative way in my assigned projects.	4.44	0.784	4.38	0.757
I energize myself whenever I feel low.	3.83	0.924	3.77	0.904
I seek out activities that release my stress.	4.22	0.647	3.88	0.927
I always finish a task on time.	3.78	0.878	3.35	1.131
I have the ability to manage work, study and personal life.	3.94	0.725	3.38	0.920
Trait-Based EI	4.18	0.583	3.94	0.674
I am a self-motivated person.	4.28	0.826	3.65	0.984
I always tell myself that I am a competent person.	4.17	0.707	3.62	0.834
I always encourage myself to do the best.	4.39	0.608	3.88	0.772
I always set goals for myself and then try my best to achieve them.	4.28	0.669	3.92	0.789
Prioritizing is my way to manage a task.	4.11	0.832	3.85	0.914
I am good at managing my moods and try not to bring negative emotions on my studies.	4.06	0.802	3.35	1.059
I can manage good relationship with my supervisor/lecturer/colleague.	4.17	0.618	3.81	0.806
I develop a positive learning environment.	4.00	0.767	3.81	0.784
I am a multiple task performer.	3.94	0.873	3.88	0.936
I get along well in a team setting.	4.33	0.594	3.96	0.745
I take constructive criticism well.	4.28	0.575	3.85	0.689

The differences in Emotional Intelligence of male and female postgraduate students at UTM Perdana School are further explored in the following Table 5. This table provides the means of the two domains of EI. Accordingly, EI among men for ability-based EI is 4.71 whereas, that of women is

3.95. Therefore, men are more intelligent than women in ability-based EI. The results are similar for trait-based emotional intelligence when male students' trait-based EI is 4.18 and that of female students is 3.94. It can be determined that the male students are higher in both the domains of EI than female students. But the difference is slightly higher. It can be further noted that male students are higher intelligence in trait-based EI, whereas, female students are more higher intelligence in ability-based EI.

The findings from the following Table 7, provide an explicit comparison of EI between male and female students of Perdana School UTM, by cross-tabulating the contents of ability-based and trait-based EI. Interestingly, in every EI variable, the mean scores for male student are slightly higher than female students. Hence it resulted in slight increment in overall EI of male students.

3.4 Assessing Differences between Genders in Stress and Emotional Intelligence

To determine whether the differences in stress levels and EI for male postgraduate students and female postgraduate students are significant or not, independent sample t- test analysis was conducted. Preliminary analysis was performed to ensure no violation of the assumption of normality and linearity.

Table 8
 Results for the *t*- test in the mean of stressors

Outcome	Gender						p-value	t-value	df
	Male			Female					
	M	SD	n	M	SD	n			
Stressors	3.30	0.725	18	3.46	0.163	26	0.414	-0.825	42
EI	4.17	0.512	18	3.80	0.699	26	0.060	1.933	42

P > 0.05, Sig. (2-tailed)

Table 8 demonstrates the t-test results. We can see that the scores for male stress and EI are; Stress: M= 3.30, SD= 0.725, EI: M= 4.17, SD= 0.512. The female scores are; Stress: M=3.46, SD=0.163, EI: M=3.80, SD= 0.699. There was an insignificant difference for the t-test for both male and female. Accordingly, the t- value for both stress and EI is -0.825 and 1.933 respectively with p-value more than 0.05. The results imply that generally, stress and EI experienced by any gender is influenced by a variety of moderator variables, including personality, hormones, biological changes, both cognitive and physiological responses, and individuals' differences. However, findings have been inconclusive.

4. Conclusions

Stress is indispensable part of a postgraduate student's life. It is neither good nor bad. The challenge is how to manage it. Knowing the source of stressors and how to handle it intelligently is the key to reduce it. Stress managed in an intelligent way is the earnest need by a student to achieve his or her academic goals. Otherwise making it dominant can affect the psychological as well as physical wellbeing of a student in an adverse manner, apart from difficulty or failure in the educational activities.

The findings of this research can be very fruitful for the senior management of Perdana School, UTM to device mechanisms in the learning process of postgraduate students to train them in

coping with their stress in an effective manner, irrespective to the gender of students. Overall, the findings of this study have a number of implications that require university attention in reducing the stress among postgraduate students, therefore, a number of mitigation measures need to be considered. It indicates a need for lecturers, career-counselling centers, and university administrators to monitor and control these factors.

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