

Does Depersonalization Affect Students' Academic Performance?

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ABSTRACT: Burnout can be referred as a prolonged stress, by which it may harms anybody at any level across sectors. A life as a tertiary level students require them to be mentally, physically and emotionally prepared, as the challenges are more vigorous in the current years. It can be expected that students are also exposed to the risk of facing burnout as a result of trying to accommodate the expectations from their parents and educators. Thus, a study has been conducted to examine whether depersonalization (as a component in burnout) affects undergraduates' academic performance from three (3) faculties in Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM), Serdang, Malaysia. 346 respondents have been selected by using disproportionate stratified sampling method. In this study, the data analysis has demonstrated that depersonalization has a weak effect on the students' academic performance. Here, it can be concluded that the undergrads' feeling of detachment is a matter of individual's internal control and definitely they are the one who will determine the focus of their studies.

KEYWORDS - Academic performance, burnout, depersonalization, students, university.

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I. INTRODUCTION

There are people who face difficulties in managing their life as a university student. It is because the environment that they have is not allowing them to be comfortable with their life. Consequently, they will find it difficult for them to survive in this tertiary level life. They will feel like they want to give up and just let their life determine what they should be in the future. When this situation happened where they cannot adapt with the situation, they tend to be more stress. Gradually, burnout is being developed without any notice.

Generally, burnout syndrome refers as "a set of psychological symptoms that relates chronic occupational stress and individual factors" (de Cavalcante Almeida, de Souza, de Almeida, de Cavalcante Almeida, & Almeida, 2016). It is reflected in depersonalization when a person seem to be "live in a bubble" and cannot feel the experience of any surroundings (Neziroglu & Donnelly, 2010); distancing him/herself in works and others by using defensive mechanisms such as being cynical, cold and sarcastic (de Cavalcante Almeida, et. al., 2016). Burnout can reviewed as an effect of a prolonged stress, which may lead to the experience of being numb and disengage with their friends, families and educators. Moreover, the consequences of burnout (in terms of depersonalization) seemed to be mostly negative such as having panic disorder and facing severe anxiety or depression (Neziroglu & Donnelly, 2010).

Maslach and Leiter (2016) has explained further on burnout and depression, in which a clear association between these variables is existed. Burnout experienced by a person can be manifested in several symptoms of depression, including frequent subscription of antidepressant medications (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). Burnout, generally, does has a negative implication on students' academic performance. It is inline with the study conducted by American College Health Association (ACHA) in fall 2017, where depression is ranked on the forth highest determinant that weaken the undergraduates' academic achievement (i.e. 17.6 per cent), after stress (33.5 per cent), anxiety (26.2 per cent) and sleep disorder (22.2 per cent).

1.1 Depersonalization and Academic Performance: An Overview

Yang (2004) provided a perspective that burnout happened due to course workload, course stress and other psychological factors, in which it can be seen through an emotional exhaustion, a potential to be depersonalized and low self achievement. Burnout usually happens among a population of students by feelings of exhaustion from their academic responsibilities and it later will affect them in several ways such as detached attitude towards peers and their academic and will induce the feelings of academic incompetence (Werther, 2012).

According to Maslach, Schaufeli and Leiter (2001), depersonalization is related with the effectiveness on the individual especially on their performances in their study. When the students feel depersonalize, they may face a burnout situation due to the stress and anxiety that they feel deep in their heart. It will make them hard to increase their confident level and self-accomplishment (Maslach, et. al., 2001). In another study, Bernhard II (2007) found a weak negative relationship existed between depersonalization and personal accomplishment ($r = -0.19$). It seemed that a student who faced depersonalization did had a low academic performance, eventhough the influence may not be as strong as other components.

Based on the research of Dyrbye, Thomas, Harper, Massie et al. (2009), students' effectiveness would decreased if they experienced depersonalization, low personal accomplishments and emotional exhaustion. It will be difficult for a student to focus and gain a sense of accomplishment because of the feelings exhaustion in self or in term of helping people toward someone is indifferent (Maslach et. al., 2001). In another perspective, depersonalization does make someone hard to remember his/her experiences, including the routine that he/she will do every day. It reflects as a kind of memory's jumbling up and it definitely affects a person's focus, including the students (Neziroglu & Donnelly, 2010). When this happen, the tendency for a student to have low academic performance may exist.

To identify on the association between depersonalization and the undergraduates' academic performance, the following hypothesis has been developed:

H1: There is a significant relationship between depersonalization and the students' performance in University Putra Malaysia.

II. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A cross-sectional study is adapted to prove the hypothesis stipulated as above. The respondents are the students selected from three (3) faculties in Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM), Serdang, Malaysia; from the Faculty of Engineering, Faculty of Medical and Health Science and Faculty of Economy and Management. The estimated population of the students is about 3619 students. From 3619 students, 346 have been chose as the respondents. This sample size is based on Krejcie and Morgan (1970) table, as advised by Sekaran and Bougie (2013).

In order to determine the sample size for each faculty, the following formula had been used :

$$\text{Sample size of the strata} = \text{size of entire sample} \div \text{population size} \times \text{layer size}$$

$$n_h = N_h / N \times n$$

(Glen, 2011)

Total students in the Faculty of Engineering is 1671 students while in the Faculty of Medical and Health Science, there are 848 students. For Faculty of Economy and Management, there are 1100 students. Bilingual questionnaires had been constructed as tools to collect the necessary data and they were distributed according to the sample size, as the following:

TABLE 1.1: Sample Size

Faculty	Sample Size
Engineering	$(346 \div 3619) \times 1671 = 160$
Medical and Health Science	$(346 \div 3619) \times 848 = 81$
Economy and Management	$(346 \div 3619) \times 1100 = 105$
Total	$(160 + 81 + 105) = 346$

III. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

With regards to the demographic analysis, majority of the respondents are female students rather than males (85.5 per cent against 14.5 per cent). More than half of the respondents are between 21 to 23 years old (i.e. 64.5 per cent), followed by 18 to 20 years old (31.8 per cent), 24 to 26 years old (3.5 per cent) and only one respondent (0.3 per cent) is above 26 years old. Cumulative Grade Point Average (CGPA) has been used to measure the level of students' current performance. As for the division of current CGPA, 53.8 per cent (from 346 respondents) have achieved a good CGPA level (i.e. between 3.0 to 3.49). Subsequently, 23.7 per cent are at the highest level (3.5 to 4.0), 21.4 per cent (2.5 to 2.99), and only 1.2 per cent got the CGPA between 2.0 to 2.49. The table below summarises the study's demographic information:

TABLE 1.2 : Demographic of the Study (n=346)

Demographic Details	Percentage
Gender	
Male	14.5
Female	85.5
Age (years old)	
18 to 20	31.8
21 to 23	64.5
24 to 25	3.5
26 and above	0.3
CGPA	
2.0 to 2.49	1.2
2.5 to 2.99	21.4
3.0 to 3.49	53.8
3.5 to 4.0	23.7

In order to test the hypothesis developed, Pearson Analysis had been used. The result of the analysis was as the following:

TABLE 1.3 : Result of the Hypothesis

Depersonalization	Pearson Correlation	Depersonalization	CGPA
		1	-.113*

*Note: Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

The analysis in Table 1.3 showed that there is a weak relationship between depersonalization and students' academic performance ($r = - 0.113, p < 0.05$). Therefore, the hypothesis proposed is accepted. In addition, the results reflected a negative relationship between these variables. In a further examination upon these variables, the students' level of agreement is higher in three (3) items than the other scales, though the difference is only a slight (about 4.6 per cent). Here, it is confirmed that depersonalization has worked adversely with the students' academic achievement in UPM i.e. higher feeling of detachment will impinge the undergraduates' academic performance. Nevertheless, the association between these variables is not really convincing, as majority of the students are able to control stress and do not have any negative thoughts about their friends or study. This result has been portrayed through the following table:

TABLE 1.4 : Percentage of Depersonalization

Items of Depersonalization	Percentage		
	D	MF	A
Unable to control stress	41.6	33	25.4
Think negative about friends or study	54.4	22.3	23.4
Always want to be alone	33.2	31.8	35
Work harder but still achieve less	30.9	29.8	39.3
Feel dissatisfied if unable to achieve target	11.5	17.1	71.4

*Note: D – Disagree, MF – Mixed Feeling, A – Agree

This result is expected, as majority of the previous studies have provided the same premise. Through the health assessment conducted by ACHA (2017), lower grade on the exam, other projects and in the course, as well as unable to complete a course have depicted a high level of anxiety and depression (as parts of the depersonalization manifestation). With a reference to Table 1.4, 39.3 per cent of the students tend to feel that no matter how hard they work, their grades are not going to be better. Kocaeksi (2016) has supported this outcome, in which he found that low interest in the course taken leads to burnout and depersonalization (that can cause stress and anxiety).

The low interest in their studies may possibly affect the students' ability to complete the course or even withdraw from it. It can be reviewed in a study conducted by de Cavalcante Almeida et. al. (2016), whereby a significant relationship existed between burnout (including depersonalization as part of its components) and the intention to abandoning the course and have failed the examination. In an earlier study, Yang (2004) has stated that the students who choose the major that can catch their eyes may have a better academic achievement and reduce the risk of burnout. The supportive facts for this study also has been revealed Michal et. al. (2015), the students who felt depersonalized have a high tendency to be absent from school/institution, to repeat their studies or even move to another school/institution (Jones, 2017).

IV. CONCLUSION

Depersonalization generally is a component of burnout and it has been indicated as a mental disorder (Neziroglu & Donnelly, 2010). Maslach and Leiter (2016) has cited depersonalization as cynicism and detachment towards others. Both perspectives signifies depersonalization as a serious matter, as it may develop negative implications towards a person's life. As a student, the current challenges, especially from the external sides, may gradually develop a sense of numbness and sarcastic, in which these conditions can affect their personal achievement. Lower grades attained implies the existence of depersonalization, eventhough some of them are not being ironic and able to control their stress level. Most of the people may not being aware of being depersonalized, but at some point of time, it can be reflected by not having a good grade. Therefore, a good social relationship (with families and friends) may help to reduce this disorder. The institutions in the higher education should further search for a way that can help the students to choose the programmes and courses they being interested to (Yang, 2004), with relevance to the needs of Industrial Revolution 4.0.

It is important to note that this research is focusing solely on the three (3) faculties in UPM and may not represents the undergraduates in Malaysia as a whole. This research can be possibly extended to all higher learning institutions in Malaysia in order to get a better view on this matter. In sum, depersonalization may not being seen as a serious matter, but with the increment of depression cases among the students (as mentioned by ACHA from fall 2016 to fall 2017), an attention need to be given in order to produce more quality students that can fulfill the needs in the near future.

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