EXPERIENCES OF INDONESIAN STUDENTS JOINING SOCIAL CLUBS TO HELP REDUCING STRESS AND ANXIETY WHILE LIVING OVERSEAS

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ABSTRAK

Gangguan kesehatan mental merupakan permasalahan yang dapat menyebabkan penyakit di seluruh dunia. Penyakit ini sebagian disebabkan oleh stres akademik yang diakibatkan oleh tugas-tugas maupun kegiatan selama belajar di sebuah perguruan tinggi atau universitas. Mahasiswa, terutama yang belajar di luar negeri, menghadapi beberapa tantangan seperti kultur shock, hambatan bahasa, perubahan lingkungan, dan perjuangan akademis yang sulit. Beberapa bukti menunjukkan bahwa dengan bergabung ke dalam klub sosial atau organisasi kemahasiswaan, mahasiswa merasakan lebih banyak manfaat yang mereka dapatkan untuk membantu mereka bertahan menyelesaikan tugas akademiknya. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi pengalaman mahasiswa Indonesia yang bergabung ke dalam klub sosial atau organisasi kemahasiswaan selama masa studi di Brisbane. Pengambilan data dalam penelitian ini dilakukan dengan cara wawancara. Wawancara dilakukan terhadap 10 informan untuk mendapatkan saturasi data yang diharapkan. Setiap wawancara direkam menggunakan alat perekam dan di transkripsi menggunakan transcriber online bernama Temi. Berdasarkan data yang diperoleh selama wawancara, tema-tema yang muncul dibagi kedalam tiga kategori yang berbeda, yaitu; melepas stres, sumber dukungan, dan nilai profesional. Masing-masing tema telah menggambarkan pola khusus mengenai koping stres dan menghadapi kehidupan akademik selama studi di luar negeri. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bergabung ke organisasi akan berkenalan dengan ritme sosial yang dinamis sehingga dianggap sebagai penghilang stres bagi anggota. Namun, pendapat yang kontra juga menarik untuk dibahas yakni terdapat dampak negatif dari bergabung ke organisasi.

Kata kunci : kesehatan mental, klub sosial, mahasiswa internasional, pengalaman

ABSTRACT

Mental health disorders are problems that can cause illness throughout the world. Students, especially those studying abroad, face several challenges such as culture shock, language barriers, environmental changes, and difficult academic struggles. Some evidence suggests that by joining a social club or student organization, students experience more benefits to help them survive their academic assignments. This research aims to explore the experiences of Indonesian students who join social clubs or student organizations during their studies in Brisbane. Data collection in this study was carried out by means of interviews. Interviews were conducted with 10 informants to obtain the expected data saturation. Each interview was recorded using a recording device and transcribed using an online transcriber called Temi. Based on the data obtained during the interview, the themes that emerged were divided into three different categories, namely; release stress, sources of support, and professional value. Each of these themes has described specific patterns regarding coping with stress and coping with academic life during study abroad. The results showed that joining an organization will get acquainted with a dynamic social rhythm so that it is considered a stress reliever for members. However, the counter opinion is also interesting to discuss, namely there are negative impacts of joining the organization.

Keywords : *international student, social club, stress, anxiety, overseas*

INTRODUCTION

A growing body of evidence has consistently shown that mental illnesses have become a significant contributor to the global burden of disease and disability (Harnois & Gabriel, 2000).

The consequences of poor mental health are particularly pronounced in the context of educational stress, which often leads to the development of depression and anxiety, especially among adolescents, with students being a particularly vulnerable group (Nguyen & Powell, 2013). The issue of suicide among Indonesian students studying abroad has recently gained considerable attention. The weight of academic responsibilities and the abundance of study-related pressures can take a severe toll on these students, leaving them feeling stressed and frustrated (Habibah et al., 2021). Predisposing factors to depression, anxiety, and stress among university students are often linked to the challenges of living independently and, in large part, the academic challenges they face (Shamsuddin et al., 2013). In fact, studies have shown that a significant percentage of students, approximately 26.3%, have contemplated suicide when grappling with depression and anxiety induced by the high educational stress, with 12.9% even making concrete plans to commit suicide, and a further 3.8% attempting to do so (Nguyen & Powell, 2013).

Furthermore, the challenges faced by Indonesian students studying overseas are compounded by factors such as language barriers, unfamiliar environments, and the shock of adapting to a new culture (Khatimah & Kusuma, 2019). To address these multifaceted challenges, a consensus among numerous researchers, spanning various academic disciplines, has emerged regarding the positive benefits associated with individuals joining social groups, including but not limited to religious clubs, local community clubs, social clubs, and sports clubs (Sudarji et al., 2022; Tuomela, 2007). These social clubs offer a safe and supportive space for individuals to receive emotional and psychological support, fostering feelings of self-esteem and personal well-being (Greenaway et al., 2015; Sudarji et al., 2022). Engaging in regular activities within these clubs not only provides an avenue for dynamic communication but also contributes to maintaining a healthy mental state (Brown & Pehrson, 2019; Harnois & Gabriel, 2000).

It is imperative to emphasize that the concept of "health" extends beyond mere biological well-being, as defined by the World Health Organization (WHO), which considers health as a state of complete mental, physical, and social well-being (Larson, 1996). This holistic perspective underscores the importance of mental and social well-being, which can be greatly enhanced by the support and companionship offered by peers and relatives within the same community (Brown & Pehrson, 2019).

The purpose of this research is to investigate the tangible impact of joining social clubs or organizations within the community on the well-being of Indonesian students studying in Brisbane. Through in-depth interviews, we aim to explore the experiences of these students who have chosen to become members of various clubs and organizations during their academic sojourn in Brisbane. This research seeks to shed light on the real-life experiences of international students grappling with academic challenges while simultaneously benefiting from the mental support provided by their surrounding community, with a particular focus on Indonesian-based organizations. This research aims to explore the experiences of Indonesian students who join social clubs or student organizations during their studies in Brisbane.

METHODS

The study was conducted using a semi-structured interview with ten interviewees. To reach the data saturation level, there were ten interviewees, they were chosen purposively and conveniently sampled. They were males and females who studied at the University of Queensland. They were members of the Indonesian Islamic Society in Brisbane (IISB). One of them was in the position of secretary-general of the organization and the others were active members. The interview questions were made from a mix of open-ended and close-ended questions. The interviews were arranged cooperatively based on their preference on where,

what day, and what time. Due to the overwhelming activities and businesses, they could not interview on the same day. Therefore, five separate interviews were done on different days and in different places with two interviewees in each interview session. The researcher agreed to meet the interviewees at the convenient place they preferred. All interviews were recorded using a sound recorder available on a smartphone. The average time spent to do one interview was 32 minutes. The interviews were transcribed using an online transcriber called Temi. The transcribed interview from Temi still needed further editing as it did not recognize non-native accents and produced the wrong words. The filler words like "um" and "uh" were removed to give more clarity. The result of these interviews was analyzed using thematic analysis and identified through the key themes.

RESULT

The data from recordings were transcribed using an online transcriber called Temi. The participant's transcripts were analyzed based on an inductive approach and coded thematically (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The themes were developed and driven by the data. There are three themes identified: releasing stress, source of support, and professional values.

Releasing Stress
When the respondents were asked about the challenges of living and studying abroad; meeting the assignments, meeting the campus standard, and difficulty in communicating in English were the most obvious.
"Yeah. it's not, it is not a burden for me, at all. But yes, I know that for some people living here in Brisbane is quite a challenge. The challenge could be from the campus life meeting the..., meeting the Assignments, the exam requirements, and then balancing their life, their social life that might be different from the previous hometown. And I know that some of my friends are having difficulties in keeping with the campus standard. Some others have kind of difficulties in mingling with others." (Participant 1)
"Of course, it is challenging, I never had assignments like… very intense. I am stressed, the first semester was so tough, I was even crying and told my mom that I was not okay here. I also felt like I was not confident to talk to people because my pronunciation is not that clear and I made long pauses, I can't explain what I, what I need to explain." (Participant 2)
"All of this is a new journey for me, I am still adapting and trying to get the best rhythm to face this challenge. To be specific, I am still refining my English capability." (Participant 6)
These answers are aligned with the prior research mentioning that student's challenges are in academic life and coping with the new environment (Shamsuddin et al., 2013). This academic life is such a job for them, and job stress might arise when the actual achievement does not match what has been targeted, this is a harmful response (physically and emotionally) that is naturally produced by the body (World Health Organization, 2000). Fortunately, they admitted that joining organizations is helpful for them to remove stress and anxiety; this is aligned with current studies showing that social support reduces depression and anxiety(Cordier et al., 2018). Some participants described the social groups or clubs are places full of joy. For example;
"Joining this club brightened me up, I can have a talk, meet people, and have space to express a joke, This club is full of happiness, and I can forget my assignments for a while." (Participant 3)
"I do not care about the burden, so I just enjoy being there." (Participant 7)
"But having some people to talk to when you need to release your stress, for example, is always good rather than having no one." (Participant 4).

This account shows that although joining an organization might add a burden for committee members to manage the organization, it still offers enjoyment for the active members. As such, it was common for students to join more than one club because it gave them "positive vibes" that the assignments never gave. They also told the researcher that sometimes involving themselves in some activities conducted by social clubs was the best place to escape from the overwhelming study tasks.

However, the impact is not always positive. They indicated that being involved in the organization, especially if assigned to the committee, the challenges are much more frustrating due to the high responsibility in undertaking the tasks given. One respondent also said that he needs sacrifice to be part of the organization. The struggles are seen when extra effort is needed to manage all organizational matters such as scheduling weekly agendas, managing conflict within the organization, sparing time on weekends, and ensuring the group members are actively involved in all agendas. The second respondent expressed his feelings as follows:

"I don't see that any involvement in any organization or our clubs really have a direct impact on us or that the impact will always be good to us." (Participant 10)

"Later on, this sense of belonging requires you to sacrifice something. Whether it is your time, whether it is your solidarity whether it is your energy and sometimes it requires you to do things that you do not enjoy." (Participant 7)

The other respondent explained that negative and positive are always coming side by side and he could feel that the positives outweighed the negatives.

"First, we should accept that there is not only positive in this world, but the negatives will also follow later. So, for me, maybe because I am only a member I can't feel the workload of organizing clubs. I only feel that sometimes it is too many agendas on the weekend that I should attend, while I also need my time on the weekend. So, yeah, it takes my weekend." (Participant 5)

"But I still believe that I gained more positives than negatives. I am less stressed when I meet the people in the club, I don't feel anxious, and I am happy." (Participant 9)

The influence of surroundings is pivotal for someone's life. The community might bring both positive and negative impacts. It depends on how people can manage those impacts to grow themselves better as mentioned in the study conducted on that stress if managed appropriately can trigger someone to perform better work (Bhui et al., 2016).

Source of Support

This is a religious organization pioneered by Indonesian students aiming to gather all Muslim students in Brisbane and fill days with positive activities. They reported that IISB has been giving them precious support that could not be obtained from any other organizations they joined. One participant reported he got religious support in reminding him about Islamic practice, for example;

"I think, I appreciate what I got as little as information, for example refreshments, mental refreshments. Yeah. We might have understood one thing long before, but maybe we had already forgotten about it or were not committed to doing it and some of the sessions of this organization refreshed me up about these things. So, I remembered them again and I tried to be a better Moslem." (Participant 10)

For another respondent, IISB has given him support to keep struggling to meet the academic standard set by the university. He feels blessed and grateful.

"I found IISB is helping in giving me motivation, mental support, and academic sharing like a family. I am truly blessed. I will not find any difficulties here in IISB if it is about seeking support." (Participant 8)

Moreover, through the religious sharing sessions or lectures (*Kuliah Shubuh*, *Pengajian Khataman*) they expanded more support such as brightening their religious side. The

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conceptualization of Islamic practice is crucial for someone to continue their life in this temporary world. The religious lectures had opened their eyes to giving more empathy towards each other. Furthermore, another form of support is by realizing that humans a social beings that cannot survive independently as well as providing friends to perceive several benefits. The participant 2 expanded;

"Because I like to socialize because I think it is better for us, as individuals to join clubs or organizations at least to know each other, at least to have more friends so you can spend some time or some activities with other people. So, you are not feeling lonely." (Participant 2)

He mentioned about loneliness, which may lead to depression and stress as there is no place to share stories and experiences. Human is a social being that needs each other. Humans will be more powerful in interdependence and social connection. The other participant referred to the organization as a support system.

"To me, IISB is a family. Everyone here in IISB cares for me. I can feel like they are my support system. They support me through my ups and downs." (Participant 5)

"I think that's the, the benefits and that people know us. People know our identity and our ability. So, it is a kind of social recognition for us." (Participant 6)

Having someone to appreciate is associated with reduced depression. It is regarded as obstacle overcoming which protects someone from suicidal planning.5 Being immersed in the community allows people to be socially recognized. Personal identity and social recognition support someone to achieve self-esteem and it can be gained from the supportive environment, it has significantly impacted an individual's mental well-being (Harnois & Gabriel, 2000).

Professional Values

IISB gives the participants not only connections, friends, memories, and experiences. This organization also allowed them to grow professionally. Participants talked about the meaning of organizing more than a hundred people, it is challenging yet appealing. Additionally, there is also an improved skill of leadership when someone is assigned to be a leader in a group setting. This value has benefited the member as explained by the participant;

"Yes, of course. Organization consists of people and people have different opinions, different preferences, different styles of communication, and different capabilities. So, to manage them, it is a challenge, of course, it is a challenge, but I'm up to that challenge. I accept that challenge and I try to give my best." (Participant 4)

"Apart from the social benefit that I mentioned before, I also feel a personal benefit as an individual. I was chosen as a coordinator of one event several months ago. This shaped me to become more organized and trained me to be a good decision-maker. I am honored to do that, it means, they put their trust in me to lead that event." (Participant 9)

By finding these answers, it is also interesting to find evidence showing that there is "a sense of self-belonging" in a group. Moreover, character building and working in a team were also perceived as benefits as those allowed them to be solidified and well-being formed (Thoits, 2013).

"I can feel solidarity here. When someone is having a problem, we feel like we also have that problem. We are the same. There is no "I" in a team. I am into them." (Participant1)
When people come and share the same problems and experiences, and they do "give and receive" then mutual support is formed, and they will give support and receive support at the same time (Gammage & Foster, 2017).

DISCUSSION

Social support is a crucial factor in maintaining good physical and mental health. Positive social support can enhance resilience to stress and protect against the development of trauma-

related psychopathology, reducing morbidity and mortality (Bird et al., 2021). On the other hand, social isolation increases the risk of morbidity and mortality, and people experiencing social isolation are more likely to die from uncommunicable diseases such as cancer. Social isolation also leads to worse mental health compared to those with good social connections, as social identity is one of the five categories of psychological experience that promotes well-being (Gable & Bedrov, 2022).

Studies have shown that social support from organizations or social clubs is imperative in maintaining health both physically and mentally. In a study conducted by Ozbay et al. (2007), it was found that positive social support can help protect the development of trauma-related psychopathology and reduce the cases of morbidity and mortality. The study also highlights the importance of social support in enhancing resilience to stress. In another study conducted by Berkman (1995), it was found that people experiencing social isolation were 1.9-3 times more likely to die from uncommunicable diseases such as cancer. The study emphasizes the importance of social connections in maintaining good physical health.

Moreover, social isolation leads to worse mental health compared to those with good social connections. In a study conducted by Saeri et al. (2018), it was found that social isolation is associated with worse mental health outcomes. The study highlights the importance of social identity in promoting well-being. Social identity is one of the five categories of psychological experience that promotes well-being, as highlighted by Harnois & Gabriel (2000).

Today, people with mental illnesses are living in the community and remain unknown. Community service has helped them by developing exclusive organizations that they can join freely at any time. By joining these organizations, they will have a sense of social responsibility and are not feeling depressed (Goldberg et al., 2015). The organization offers opportunities to build relationships and social connections where multicultural people can expose each other. A possibility to find matched careers by sharing passions and interests among students is also available through joining clubs or organizations. Additionally, leadership skills are shaped through the framework of professionalism offered in the organization, where people learn to lead a group of people and learn mental health management (Gammage & Foster, 2017)

In conclusion, social support is imperative in maintaining good physical and mental health. Positive social support can enhance resilience to stress and protect against the development of trauma-related psychopathology, reducing morbidity and mortality (Mao & Shen, 2015). Social isolation increases the risk of morbidity and mortality, and people experiencing social isolation are more likely to die from uncommunicable diseases such as cancer (Carpenter, 2002). Social isolation also leads to worse mental health compared to those with good social connections. Community service has helped people with mental illnesses by developing exclusive organizations that they can join freely at any time, providing a sense of social responsibility and preventing depression (Gould, 2022). These organizations offer opportunities to build relationships and social connections, where multicultural people can expose each other and find matched careers by sharing passions and interests among students through joining clubs or organizations (Gable & Bedrov, 2022). Leadership skills are also shaped through the framework of professionalism offered in the organization, where people learn to lead a group of people and learn mental health management.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this research focused on exploring the experiences of Indonesian students studying in Brisbane and their engagement with clubs or organizations as a means to cope with the challenges posed by mental illnesses, particularly those arising from educational stress and the demands of university tasks and activities. The study underscores the significance of social engagement through clubs and organizations as a potential avenue for addressing the

challenges posed by mental illnesses in a university context, particularly among international students. While these groups can offer stress relief, a sense of support, and opportunities to develop professional values, it is crucial to acknowledge that individual experiences may vary, and negative consequences might also arise. This research sheds light on the complex interplay between social involvement and mental well-being, emphasizing the need for further exploration and understanding in this domain.

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