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## THE DIFFERENCES IN GENDER AND EDUCATION LEVEL ON MENTAL HEALTH LITERACY AMONG YOUTHS IN MALAYSIA

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**Abstract:** This quantitative study investigated mental health literacy (MHL) among Malaysian youth, considering gender and education level. A sample of 134 youths aged 15-30 from different regions in Malaysia participated, with 43 males and 91 females. Data were collected using a Google Form, assessing demographic background and MHL components. This study utilises random sampling as its sampling method. The assessment of mental health literacy was conducted using a formal standardised questionnaire. Data analysis was conducted using SPSS version 27, utilising descriptive statistics and one-way ANOVA. Results indicated no significant gender difference in MHL, but a significant relationship between education level and MHL. The study comprehensively examines how gender and education level influence mental health literacy among Malaysian youth, identifying challenges and disparities. Future research should explore socio-cultural influences and develop targeted interventions to improve mental health knowledge among youth with lower education levels. Policymakers and educators can use these findings to support the mental health needs of Malaysian youth, enhancing overall well-being.

**Keywords:** Gender, Education level, Mental Health Literacy, Youth, Malaysia

### INTRODUCTION

Mental health literacy (MHL), introduced by Jorm et al. in 1997, encompasses the knowledge and beliefs individuals possess about mental disorders, enabling them to recognize, manage, and prevent such conditions (Kutcher et al., 2016). In a society transitioning from childhood dependence to adult independence, youth play a crucial role. According to the United Nations, youth is generally defined as individuals between the ages of 15 and 24, although different definitions may be used (UN, n.d.). In the Malaysian context, the Ministry of Youth and Sports has extended the age range to encompass those between 15 and 30 years old (Yunus & Landau, 2019).

Education serves as a cornerstone in the development of youth, empowering them with the knowledge and skills necessary for personal growth and societal contribution. Malaysia's education system is structured into different levels, starting from preschool, followed by primary, secondary, post-secondary, and tertiary education. Preschool education, although not mandatory, boasts an impressive enrolment rate of approximately 91% for children aged four and five (Wan et al., 2018). Primary education exhibits a high enrolment rate of nearly 98%, while secondary education reaches 90% (Wan et al., 2018). Furthermore, the Malaysian education system offers various pathways for higher education, such as pre-university programs and tertiary institutions providing diploma, bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees across diverse fields of study (Wan et al., 2018).

Despite the significant progress in educational attainment, understanding the mental health literacy levels among Malaysian youth remains a critical area to be explored. This research aims to assess the varying levels of mental health literacy among Malaysian youth, taking into account their educational background and gender. It also aims to investigate differences in mental health literacy based on gender and different levels of education among Malaysian youth.

By focusing on this dimension, this study aims to shed light on the landscape of mental health literacy among Malaysian youth, providing valuable insights into the role of education and gender in shaping their understanding of mental health disorders.

## **Research Background**

This study focuses on the mental health literacy (MHL) of Malaysian youth, examining the effects of gender differences and education levels. Mental health literacy refers to an individual's knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes regarding mental health disorders, which plays a crucial role in recognizing symptoms, seeking help, and promoting positive mental health outcomes (Sampaio et al., 2022). Understanding the level of MHL among youths is of paramount importance, as early intervention and support can significantly impact their well-being (Mendenhall and Frauenholtz, 2013).

Previous studies conducted in various countries have shown that females tend to have greater MHL compared to males (Leighton, 2010; Lee et al., 2020). Furthermore, the role of education level in shaping MHL outcomes is crucial to consider, as lower education levels may be associated with poorer MHL. Understanding these disparities is essential for addressing help-seeking behaviours and improving mental health outcomes among Malaysian youths.

Research specific to mental health literacy among Malaysian youths is limited, despite various studies exploring this topic in different populations such as the United States of America (Dunn et al., 2009), Australia (Tully, 2019), South India (Ogorchukwu et al., 2016), Germany (Angermeyer et al., 2009), Canada (Marcus & Westra, 2012), and the Philippines (Ines, 2019). Therefore, there is a need for more focused research to enhance our understanding of mental health literacy specifically among Malaysian youth.

The current state of research on the differences in mental health literacy among Malaysian youths, specifically pertaining to gender and education level, reveals significant gaps. Limited studies have been conducted to explore the specific impacts of gender and education level on mental health literacy in this population. Consequently, there is a lack of comprehensive understanding regarding how these factors contribute to variations in mental health literacy among Malaysian youths. The existing literature provides only limited insights into the unique challenges and disparities faced by different genders and educational groups in attaining adequate mental health literacy. Therefore, further research is necessary to fill these gaps and provide a more comprehensive understanding of how gender and education level influence the mental health literacy of youths in Malaysia.

The hypotheses propose that among Malaysian youth, there exists a significant relationship between gender and mental health literacy, as well as a significant relationship between education levels and mental health literacy. These hypotheses aim to explore the associations between gender, education levels, and mental health literacy among Malaysian youth, indicating that gender and education may play important roles in shaping mental health literacy in this population.

To address these research gaps and test the hypotheses, this study employed a quantitative research design to investigate the levels of mental health literacy among Malaysian youth, considering the influence of gender and education level. A representative sample of Malaysian youths was selected using a random sampling technique.

## **Problem Statement**

Mental health literacy (MHL) is a crucial component of promoting well-being and seeking appropriate help for mental health issues. In the Malaysian context, there are several knowledge gaps pertaining to factors associated with MHL, particularly among young individuals. Among these factors, gender and education level have emerged as significant considerations. While some studies have examined the influence of gender on MHL, there is a dearth of research specifically investigating this relationship within Malaysia.

Singh et al. (2021) conducted a pioneering study on mental health literacy among young adolescents in Malaysia. Their findings indicated that gender plays a significant role in MHL, with females exhibiting a greater ability to accurately identify mental health disorders, higher intentions to seek help, and overall better levels of MHL compared to males. However, it is important to note that Singh et al.'s study

focused on young adolescents, and the extent to which their findings apply to other age groups, such as young adults, remains unclear.

Contradicting the results of Singh et al., a study in Canada found no significant gender differences within the young adult group in terms of basic mental health knowledge. Both males and females displayed similar proficiency in estimating the prevalence of mental health disorders (Marcus & Westra, 2012). This contradiction between studies highlights the need for further exploration of the relationship between gender and MHL, specifically within the context of young individuals in Malaysia.

Furthermore, previous research also revealed no significant interaction between participant gender and vignette character gender in relation to treatment seeking, character happiness, or work success (Hadjimina & Furnham, 2017). However, Swami (2012) discovered significant differences in the accurate identification of depression cases based on both the gender of the respondent and the target individual. These discrepancies underscore the complexity of the relationship between gender and MHL and emphasize the importance of investigating these factors within the specific cultural and societal context of Malaysia.

While strides have been made in educational attainment in Malaysia, there remains a critical gap in understanding the mental health literacy levels among the youth. Education is a fundamental cornerstone in the development of young individuals, equipping them with essential knowledge and skills. The Malaysian education system, comprising preschool to tertiary levels, has achieved commendable enrollment rates. However, the mental health literacy landscape among Malaysian youth remains underexplored. This research aims to address these gaps by assessing varying levels of mental health literacy, considering educational backgrounds. The study acknowledges that mental health literacy is vital for recognizing, managing, and preventing mental disorders. The existing literature reveals a dearth of research specific to mental health literacy among Malaysian youth, particularly in relation to gender and education levels. Notably, among the educational elite, a wide variability in mental health literacy has been identified (Lauber et al., 2005). Additionally, years in practice positively correlate with awareness and knowledge of mental health treatments and services, suggesting that educators with more experience may possess greater awareness and knowledge, possibly due to higher education levels (Mansfieldw et al., 2021).

To bridge these gaps in knowledge and address the inconsistencies observed in previous studies, this research aims to explore the relationship between gender and education levels in mental health literacy among young individuals in Malaysia. Specifically, the study seeks to determine whether gender differences exist in MHL and whether education levels moderate the relationship between gender and MHL. By examining the unique socio-cultural factors and educational backgrounds of young individuals in Malaysia, this research endeavours to provide valuable insights into effective strategies for enhancing MHL and promoting mental well-being in this population.

This elaborated research problem encompasses the identified knowledge gaps, addresses the contradictions in previous research findings, and emphasizes the need for a focused investigation into the relationship between gender, education levels, and mental health literacy among young individuals in Malaysia.

### **Research Objectives**

1. To examine the levels of mental health literacy among Malaysian youth with different education levels and gender.
2. To identify the differences of mental health literacy based on gender.
3. To identify the difference of mental health based on education level.

### **Research Questions**

1. What are the mental health literacy levels of youths in Malaysia with different education levels and gender?
2. What is the difference of mental health literacy based on gender?
3. What is the difference of mental health based on education level?

### **Null Hypotheses**

1. There is no significant difference on mental health literacy on gender.
2. There is no significant difference on mental health literacy on education level.

### **Literature Review**

Mental health literacy (MHL), encompassing knowledge and understanding of mental health issues, is crucial for youths in Malaysia to recognize symptoms, seek appropriate help, and engage in supportive behaviours. This literature review aims to explore the differences in MHL among Malaysian youths, focusing on the impact of gender and education level.

Research shows that women had significantly higher levels of mental health literacy than men (Gorczynski & Sims-Schouten, 2022). Numerous studies have also consistently examined the association between gender and MHL, revealing a pattern where females tend to exhibit greater MHL compared to males (Hadjimina & Furnham, 2017; Miles et al., 2020). However, it is important to determine whether this gender disparity in MHL extends to the specific context of Malaysian youths. Exploring the MHL levels of both male and female youths can help identify any gender-based differences in mental health knowledge and awareness, potentially highlighting areas for targeted interventions and support.

Moreover, understanding the implications of gender and education level on MHL is crucial for addressing help-seeking behaviours and mental health outcomes among Malaysian youths. Research has shown that limited knowledge about mental health contributes to increased vulnerability to suicide among males (Kaneko & Motohashi, 2007). Additionally, delays in seeking help for mental health issues have been observed among young males (Cotton et al., 2006). By investigating the intersection of gender and education level, researchers can further explore the specific challenges faced by certain subgroups of Malaysian youths. This knowledge can inform the development of targeted interventions and educational programs to improve MHL, enhance help-seeking behaviours, and ultimately promote better mental health outcomes among youths in Malaysia.

Furthermore, the role of education level in shaping mental health literacy (MHL) outcomes among Malaysian youths is crucial to consider. Previous research has highlighted that individuals with lower levels of education may have poorer MHL (Kaneko & Motohashi, 2007). In the context of Malaysian youths, it is important to investigate how education level influences their mental health literacy. Understanding the impact of education level on MHL among Malaysian youths can provide insights into how educational attainment affects mental health knowledge and whether specific educational interventions may be necessary to bridge the gap in MHL among different educational groups.

Recent studies have also shown the significance of health literacy in the adoption of health promotion strategies and self-care among higher education students in Portugal (Oliveira et al., 2022). These findings suggest that Portuguese students with higher health literacy are more likely to actively engage in health promotion and self-care practices. To enhance these strategies, awareness-raising actions could be implemented to improve health behaviours.

Additionally, a comprehensive analysis incorporating nineteen studies from nine countries has revealed a significant association between literacy and mental health, with lower literacy levels being associated with greater mental health difficulties (Hunn et al., 2023). Several factors such as age, gender, poverty, and years of education were reported to interact with this association. These findings further emphasize the importance of addressing literacy levels when considering mental health outcomes.

To shed light on the gender and education disparities in MHL among Malaysian youths, it is crucial to conduct research that specifically focuses on this population. By investigating the MHL levels of both male and female youths with varying education levels, researchers can better understand the unique factors that contribute to these disparities in the Malaysian context. This research can involve assessing the mental health knowledge and awareness of Malaysian youths through surveys, interviews, or educational interventions, allowing for a comprehensive examination of the factors that shape their MHL.

The existing literature supports the notion that females generally exhibit greater MHL compared to males, while individuals with lower education levels may have poorer MHL. However, there is a need for further research specifically targeting Malaysian youths to explore the differences in MHL across gender and education levels.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Participants**

The study recruited 134 youths aged 15-30 from different regions in Malaysia, consisting of 43 males and 91 females. It should be noted that the participants came from diverse educational backgrounds. Convenience sampling was employed to recruit participants, mainly using online platforms and social media channels. Prior to their involvement in the study, informed consent was obtained from all participants.

### **Research Instrument**

To distribute the questionnaire, multiple methods were employed, including the use of a QR code and a direct link to the Google Form. These distribution channels were utilized through various mediums, including social media platforms, in-person interactions, and group chats. This approach aimed to reach a diverse and representative sample of youths in Malaysia.

The questionnaire consisted of several sections and items designed to capture information relevant to the research objectives. It included demographic questions to collect data on gender and education level, which were the focal variables of the study. Additionally, the questionnaire incorporated items related to mental health literacy, aiming to assess participants' knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes regarding mental health issues.

By utilizing Google Forms, the questionnaire offered an accessible and user-friendly format for respondents to provide their responses. The online platform facilitated data collection, storage, and analysis, streamlining the research process, and ensuring efficient handling of a large volume of responses.

### **Research Procedure**

Data collection for this pilot study involved the use of a Google Form questionnaire. The questionnaire was divided into two main sections: demographic profile and the Mental Health Literacy Scale (MHLS). In total, the questionnaire comprised 42 items that participants were required to respond to. Clear instructions were provided to the participants on how to complete the questionnaire, and they were given ample time to do so according to their own convenience. There were no specific requirements regarding the location, time, or day for questionnaire completion. The privacy and confidentiality of participants' responses were maintained, and it was emphasized that their participation was voluntary. Participants were also informed that they had the option to withdraw from the study at any time without any negative consequences.

### **Data Analysis**

The collected data from the questionnaire was analysed using the widely used Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software, specifically version 27.0. Descriptive statistics, such as means, standard deviations, and frequencies, were calculated to provide a comprehensive overview of the participants' demographic variables and their responses to the survey items. This analysis allowed for a

better understanding of the characteristics and trends within the sample population. To address the research questions, an independent t-test and one-way ANOVA analysis was conducted to examine the differences of gender and education level on the mental health literacy of young individuals in Malaysia.

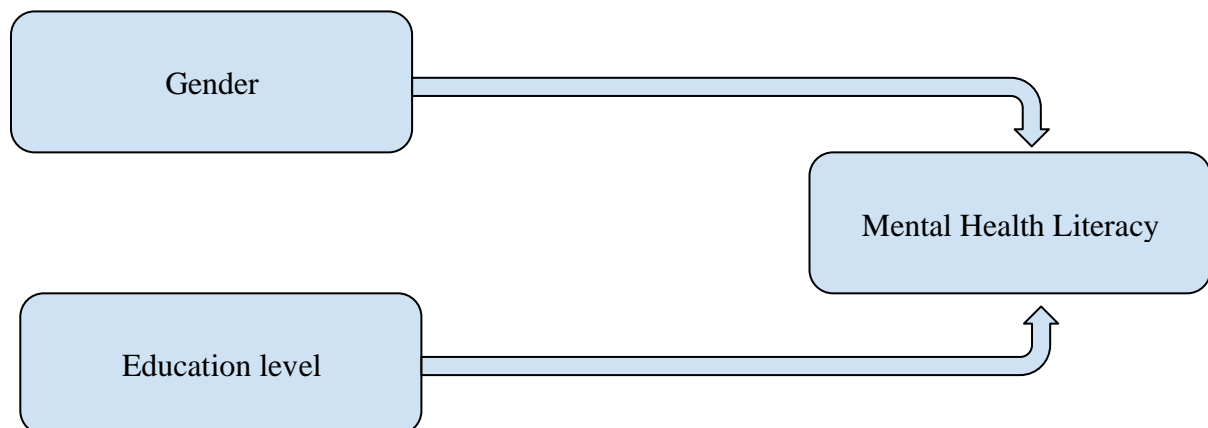
**Reliability Analysis**

Table 1: Mental Health Literacy Scale Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	Chronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	N of Items
.795	.793	35

A preliminary investigation was carried out to assess the effectiveness of the survey questionnaire used, involving a sample of 50 university students. Out of these participants, 8 were male and 42 were female. The purpose of the study was to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the questionnaire. The findings in Table 1 revealed that the Cronbach's Alpha coefficient for the reliability of the MHLS questionnaire was 0.80, surpassing the threshold of 0.70. This indicates that the questionnaire items possess stability and consistency, as stated by Taber (2017). Consequently, the research questionnaire demonstrated high reliability, which is satisfactory for proceeding with the actual study.

**Research Framework**



This study investigates gender and education-related disparities in mental health literacy (MHL) among Malaysian youth. With a quantitative approach and random sampling, the research aims to understand MHL variations, gender discrepancies, and educational impacts. Objectives encompass MHL examination across different gender and education levels, gender-based distinctions, and education's role. The literature review underscores the need for tailored interventions and educational programs. Ultimately, this research delves into MHL complexities among Malaysian youth, informing targeted interventions for enhanced mental well-being.

Figure 1: Research Framework

## RESULTS

### Gender and Mental Health Literacy

Table 2: Mean Value (M) and Standard Deviation (SD) For Gender

	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
MHLS	Male	43	109.56	13.17	2.01
	Female	91	113.53	14.27	1.50

Table 3: Independent Sample T-Test Analysis of MHL between Male and Female Youth

		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
MHLS	Equal variances assumed	.58	.45	-1.54	132	.13

Table 2 revealed a difference in mental health literacy scores between males ( $M = 109.56$ ,  $SD = 13.17$ ) and females ( $M = 113.53$ ,  $SD = 14.27$ ). However, the t-test analysis ( $t(88.81) = -1.585$ ,  $p > .05$ ) indicated that this difference was not statistically significant as shown in Table 3. Consequently, the null hypothesis that stated that there is no significant difference between gender and mental health literacy is failed to be rejected.

### Education level

Table 4: Mean Value (M) and Standard Deviation (SD) for Education Level

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Secondary School	6	108.17	15.36
Foundation	15	113.27	12.09
Diploma	20	114.20	19.16
Degree	90	111.26	12.55
Master	3	132.33	13.43
Total	134	112.25	14.00

Table 5: One-way ANOVA analysis between MHL and Education Level

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Squares	F	Sig.
Between Groups	1490.62	4	372.64	1.96	0.11
Within Groups	24572.76	129	190.49		
Total	26063.37	133			

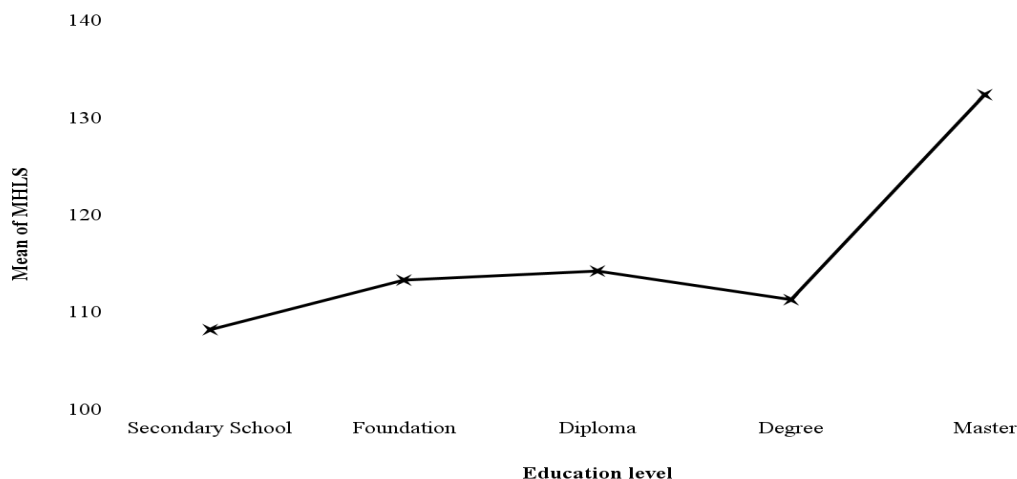


Figure 2: Mean Plot between MHL and Education Level

Regarding education level, the mean scores depicted in Table 4 for different categories were as follows: Master ( $M = 132.33$ ,  $SD = 13.43$ ), Diploma ( $M = 114.20$ ,  $SD = 19.16$ ), Foundation ( $M = 113.27$ ,  $SD = 12.09$ ), Degree ( $M = 111.26$ ,  $SD = 12.55$ ), and Secondary School ( $M = 108.17$ ,  $SD = 15.36$ ). An analysis of variance was performed ( $F(4, 129) = 1.96$ ,  $p > .05$ ), as detailed in Table 5, indicating a lack of statistically significant differences among education levels. The insignificance of  $p = 0.11$  reinforces that the result was not statistically significant. Consequently, the null hypothesis is failed to be rejected, suggesting no significant differences in mental health literacy scores across varying education levels.

## DISCUSSION

The present study aimed to assess the levels of mental health literacy (MHL) among Malaysian youth, considering their educational backgrounds and gender. The research findings revealed interesting insights into the relationship between gender, education levels, and mental health literacy. Contrary to previous research, which suggested that females have higher mental health literacy, no significant disparities were found between males and females in this study. This finding contradicts studies by Gorczynski & Sims-Schouten (2022), Hadjimina & Furnham (2017), and Miles et al. (2020) but aligns with research indicating that males with limited knowledge about mental health are more vulnerable to suicide (Kaneko & Motohashi, 2007). Moreover, young males often delay seeking help for mental health issues (Cotton et al., 2006). These findings contribute to the existing literature and emphasize the need to consider cultural and contextual factors that may influence gender differences in mental health literacy.

The study also revealed a significant link between education level and mental health literacy among young Malaysians. Participants with higher educational attainment, particularly those pursuing a master's degree, demonstrated greater mental health literacy compared to individuals with lower education levels, supporting previous research by Kaneko & Motohashi (2007). Interestingly, a slight decline in mental health literacy was observed among degree students, who constituted the majority of the respondent. Conversely, diploma students exhibited slightly higher mental health literacy levels than their counterparts pursuing a degree. These findings indicate a complex association between education and mental health literacy, highlighting the need for further investigation. It is crucial to comprehend the underlying reasons for this discrepancy, which might be influenced by the limited representation of students from other education levels and could impact the overall findings. As noted by Martínez-Mesa et al. (2014), a small sample size may fail to demonstrate the desired difference or accurately estimate the frequency of the event of interest with an acceptable level of accuracy. The participant distribution across education levels in our study was as follows: 90 degree students, 20 diploma students, 3 master's students, 15 foundation students, and 6 secondary students.



In line with the study conducted by Lee et al. (2023), our findings indicate that mental health awareness is influenced by two key factors: knowledge on mental health and attitude towards mental health. Familiarity with mental health issues and exposure to media were identified as significant factors shaping knowledge on mental health, knowledge on professional help, and attitudes towards mental health among Malaysian youth. Additionally, our study revealed that knowledge on mental health acts as a positive mediator in the relationship between media exposure and mental health awareness. These results underscore the importance of promoting accurate mental health knowledge and fostering positive attitudes towards mental health while considering the impact of familiarity and media exposure on mental health awareness. Furthermore, the significance of adopting a whole-of-society approach and fostering collaboration among individuals, families, communities, and policymakers in prioritizing and addressing youth mental health is recognized (Office of the Surgeon General, 2021).

## **CONCLUSION**

This study investigated the influence of gender and education level on mental health literacy (MHL) among Malaysian youth, providing valuable insights into the unique challenges and disparities faced by young individuals in Malaysia. The findings revealed that gender alone does not significantly affect MHL among Malaysian youth, challenging previous research suggesting gender-based differences in MHL. However, it is important to explore socio-cultural influences that may shape mental health knowledge and attitudes within the Malaysian context. Future research should delve deeper into the factors contributing to gender differences in MHL and examine the specific challenges faced by males in seeking help for mental health issues.

Additionally, the study emphasized the significant role of education level in shaping MHL among Malaysian youth. Lower education levels were associated with poorer MHL, highlighting the necessity of targeted interventions and educational programs for youth with limited educational opportunities. Policymakers and educators should consider implementing strategies to promote mental health literacy, such as integrating mental health education into school curricula and providing accessible resources and support outside of formal educational settings. It is crucial to acknowledge the limitations of this study, including the small convenience sample and potential biases associated with self-report measures. The cross-sectional design restricts causal interpretations and generalizability to the larger population of Malaysian youth. To obtain a more comprehensive understanding of the complex relationships between gender, education level, and MHL among Malaysian youth, future research should employ larger and more diverse samples, longitudinal designs, and mixed-method approaches.

Overall, this study contributes to the growth of knowledge on mental health literacy among Malaysian youth. It underscores the significance of considering educational backgrounds and developing targeted interventions to enhance mental health knowledge and promote positive mental health outcomes. By addressing the specific challenges and disparities identified, policymakers, educators, and mental health professionals can collaborate to support the mental health needs of Malaysian youth and foster a society that values and prioritizes mental well-being.

## **Informed Consent Statement**

I am aware that my participation is entirely optional and that I can stop at any moment, for any reason, and without incurring any fees. I am aware that a copy of this consent form will be provided to me. I freely consent to participate in this study.

## **Conflict of Interest**

The researcher declares no conflict of interest.

## **Ethics Statement**

All procedures utilized during this study that involved using human participants were carried out in compliance with the institutional research committee's ethical guidelines. All participants gave their informed consent.

### **Author Contributions**

Aimi Shahida Ahmad Rashidi contributes for the most part of the research which includes the based concept of the variables, research methodology, data acquisition, data analysis and interpretation. Norsimah Dasan is the main research supervisor for this study which provides guidance for the authors to proceed with this research. The article was also improved with ideas and comments from Mazni Mustapha

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### **Data Availability Statement**

The datasets generated during and/or analyzed during the current study are available from the first author on reasonable request.

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