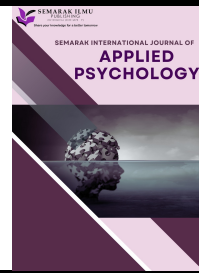




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# Action Strategies and its Relationship with Depression among Secondary School Students

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### ABSTRACT

This study investigates the types of coping strategies used by high school students in Chemor, Perak, to manage obstacles and daily depression. The research specifically examines gender differences in coping strategies, identifies the types of strategies utilized by students, and explores the relationship between these strategies and levels of depression. The study sample consists of 100 randomly selected students, all aged 16. The "Brief Cope" questionnaire was employed to assess coping strategies, while the Beck Depression Index-II (BDI-II) measured depression levels. Data analysis involved descriptive statistics and inferential tests, including independent sample t-tests and Pearson correlation. Results indicate significant gender differences in coping strategies and a notable correlation between these strategies and depression levels among students. The findings underscore the importance of effective coping mechanisms in managing adolescent mental health, offering critical insights for educators and counselors.

## 1. Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has brought unprecedented changes to educational systems worldwide, with Malaysia being no exception. The sudden and compulsory shift to online learning has stirred significant discussions among educators, students, and policymakers. The debates primarily focus on the effectiveness and challenges of online versus traditional face-to-face teaching methods. This transformation has particularly impacted adolescents, who are at a critical juncture of physical, cognitive, and socio-cultural development. The implications of this shift are far-reaching, influencing not only academic outcomes but also the mental health and overall well-being of students.

Adolescence is a pivotal stage in human development, characterized by significant physical and psychological changes. It is a period marked by the exploration of identity, increased autonomy, and the establishment of personal values and beliefs. The disruption caused by the pandemic has

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exacerbated the challenges typically faced during this developmental stage, including academic pressures, social isolation, and anxiety about the future. These stressors can lead to mental health issues, particularly depression, which is increasingly prevalent among adolescents.

Depression is a complex mental health disorder that affects an individual's mood, behaviour, and overall well-being. It can result in persistent feelings of sadness, loss of interest in activities, and even physical symptoms such as fatigue or changes in appetite. The pandemic's impact, with its associated isolation and uncertainty, has heightened the risk of depression among students. This has underscored the importance of effective coping mechanisms, which are strategies individuals use to manage stress and mitigate its negative effects on mental health.

Coping strategies are essential tools for managing the psychological and emotional challenges that arise during adolescence. These strategies can be broadly categorized into three types: problem-focused coping, emotion-focused coping, and avoidance coping. Problem-focused coping involves taking action to address the source of stress, such as seeking help or finding solutions to problems. Emotion-focused coping includes activities that help manage emotional responses, like seeking social support or engaging in relaxation techniques. Avoidance coping, on the other hand, involves evading the problem or stressor, which can sometimes lead to negative outcomes if overused.

The research conducted in this study aims to explore the coping strategies employed by secondary school students in Malaysia during the COVID-19 pandemic and their relationship with depression. The study focuses on identifying the differences in coping strategies based on gender and examining how these strategies correlate with levels of depression among students. The use of the "Brief Cope" questionnaire and the Beck Depression Inventory-II (BDI-II) provides a comprehensive measure of coping strategies and depression levels, respectively.

One of the key research questions is whether there are significant gender differences in the coping strategies used by adolescents. Previous studies have suggested that females are more likely to employ emotion-focused coping strategies, while males may lean towards problem-focused strategies. Understanding these differences is crucial for developing targeted interventions that can better support students based on their specific needs and coping styles.

Another important aspect of the research is to investigate the direct relationship between coping strategies and depression. This involves assessing whether certain types of coping strategies are more effective in mitigating depressive symptoms. For instance, problem-focused coping strategies might be more beneficial in reducing depression compared to avoidance strategies, which may lead to further psychological distress.

The significance of this study lies in its potential to inform educators, counselors, and policymakers about the most effective strategies to support adolescents during challenging times. By identifying the coping mechanisms that are most effective in managing depression, schools can implement targeted mental health programs that address the specific needs of students. Additionally, this research can contribute to the broader understanding of how the Covid-19 pandemic has affected mental health among young people, providing valuable insights for future public health responses.

In conclusion, the Covid-19 pandemic has significantly impacted the mental health of secondary school students in Malaysia, highlighting the need for effective coping strategies to manage depression and other psychological challenges. This study aims to fill a critical gap in the literature by providing a comprehensive analysis of the coping strategies used by adolescents and their effectiveness in mitigating depression. The findings are expected to have important implications for mental health interventions and policy-making in the education sector.

## 2. Methodology

To address the limitations of the previous study on coping strategies and depression among secondary school students, this new methodology aims to provide a more comprehensive and accurate analysis. The study will use a quantitative approach, incorporating a larger and more diverse sample, enhanced data collection methods, and advanced statistical analyses. Additionally, ethical considerations and protocols will be strictly adhered to, ensuring the well-being of all participants.

### *i. Expanded Sample Size and Diverse Population*

#### *a. Sample Size Expansion:*

- The study will include a minimum of 500 students, a significant increase from the previous 100 students. This larger sample size will provide more reliable and generalizable results.

#### *b. Diverse Population:*

- To enhance the representativeness of the study, participants will be drawn from multiple schools across various regions, including urban, suburban, and rural areas. This diversity will ensure that the findings reflect a wide range of socio-economic backgrounds, cultural contexts, and educational environments.

#### *c. Sampling Technique:*

- Stratified random sampling will be employed to ensure proportional representation of different demographic groups, such as age, gender, socio-economic status, and academic performance. This approach will help in controlling for confounding variables and provide a more accurate analysis of the data.

### *ii. Enhanced Data Collection Methods*

#### *a. Multiple Data Collection Instruments:*

- The study will utilize quantitative methods to collect comprehensive data on coping strategies and depression levels among students. The instruments will include:
  - Standardized Tests: Instruments like the Beck Depression Inventory-II (BDI-II) and the Brief COPE scale will be used to measure depression levels and coping strategies, respectively.

#### *b. Data Collection Procedure:*

- Data will be collected at multiple points to capture any changes over time. This longitudinal approach will allow for the analysis of trends and patterns in coping strategies and depression levels.

#### *c. Use of Technology:*

- Digital platforms will be used for administering questionnaires and collecting data. This approach will facilitate a more efficient data collection process and improve data accuracy by minimizing manual data entry errors.

### *iii. Control for Confounding Variables*

#### *a. Data Analysis Techniques:*

- Advanced statistical techniques, including regression analysis and structural equation modeling, will be employed to control for confounding variables and accurately identify the relationships between coping strategies, depression, and other variables.

### *iv. Ethical Protocols*

#### *a. Informed Consent:*

- All participants and their guardians (for minor students) will provide informed consent before participating in the study. The consent form will include a detailed explanation of the study's purpose, procedures, potential risks, and benefits.
- b. Confidentiality and Privacy:*
  - Participants' data will be anonymized to protect their privacy. Personal identifiers will be removed, and data will be stored securely with restricted access.
- c. Support and Resources:*
  - The study will include protocols for handling participants' psychological distress. Participants who exhibit signs of depression or other mental health issues will be provided with access to counseling services and other necessary support.
- d. Ethical Review:*
  - The study will be reviewed and approved by an ethical review board to ensure compliance with ethical standards and the protection of participants' rights and well-being.
- v. Advanced Statistical Analysis*
- a. Data Analysis Software:*
  - Statistical software such as SPSS and AMOS will be used for data analysis. These tools will facilitate the application of advanced statistical techniques and ensure the accuracy of the results.
- b. Descriptive and Inferential Statistics:*
  - Descriptive statistics will be used to summarize the data, including means, standard deviations, and frequency distributions. Inferential statistics, such as t-tests, ANOVA, and correlation analysis, will be employed to test hypotheses and explore relationships between variables.
- c. Multivariate Analysis:*
  - Multivariate techniques, such as multiple regression and structural equation modelling, will be used to analyse the complex relationships between coping strategies, depression, and other variables. These techniques will allow for the control of multiple confounding variables simultaneously.

This new methodology addresses the limitations of the previous study by expanding the sample size, diversifying the population, enhancing data collection methods, controlling for confounding variables, adhering to strict ethical protocols, and employing advanced statistical analyses. These improvements will provide a more comprehensive and accurate understanding of the relationships between coping strategies and depression among secondary school students. The findings of this study will have significant implications for educational institutions, mental health professionals, and policymakers in developing effective interventions and support systems for students.

### **3. Data Findings**

Data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statics version 21.0 software. Descriptive statistical analysis is used to see mean, percentage, frequency, and also standard deviation to describe the subject's background profile. Inferential statistical analysis is an independent sample t-test used to determine coping strategies used by students while Pearson's correlation is used to determine the relationship between coping strategies and its subscales with depression.

### 3.1 Variable Data Analysis

**Table 1**

Study demographics: Descriptive statistical analysis of subject gender profile

Gender	Min	Percent (%)
Men	34	34.0
Female	66	66.0
Amount	100	100.0

Based on Table 1 shows the results of gender analysis from the questionnaire that has been distributed. The result obtained is the percentage of gender is 34% (Min= 34) for male students and 64% (Mean = 66) for female students.

**Table 2**

Differences in male and female action strategies: Action strategies between males and females

Gender	No	Min	Deviation Standards	t-value	Level Significant
Men	34	2.3159	.39410	-1.486	.141
Female	66	2.4321	.35787		

Based on Table 2, the results are not significant ( $t = -1.486$ ,  $df = 98$ ,  $p > .05$ ). There are differences between the two sexes in coping strategies. The mean value for men is (Mean = 2.3159, SP = .39410) while the mean for women is (Mean = 2.4321, SP = .35787).

### 3.2 Action Strategies used by Students

Avoidance-oriented coping involves activities, whether physical or cognitive, that aim to avoid. For example, shifting focus and attention to other things so as not to think about and try to forget those things. There is a time make the problem is faced as a joke in addition to denying the existence of the problem because he refuses to face it.

**Table 3**

Mean value, standard deviation of avoidance strategies used by students

Action Strategy	Min	Standard Deviation (SP)
Avoidance Orientation	1.8687	.43315

Based on Table 3, the results show that the overall Avoidance Orientation Action Strategy is the least (Mean = 1.8687, SP = .43315). The avoidance-oriented Strategy is the least used strategy by students.

### 3.3 Task Orientation @ Problem (Problem @ Task Oriented)

Task @ Problem coping focuses on the problem or task (problem/task oriented) which consists of efforts to solve the problem encountered. This Action Force will focus on the actions that need to be taken, putting together steps and strategies that are deemed appropriate to solve the problems faced.

**Table 4**

Mean value, standard deviation of task@problem performance strategies used by students

Action Strategy	Min	Standard Deviation (SP)
Task Orientation @ Problem	2.8660	.50895

Based on Table 4, the results show that the Task @ Problem Oriented Action Strategy is most often used by students (Mean = 2.8660, SP = 0.50895).

### 3.4 Emotion Oriented

Emotion-oriented coping is an individual's preferred style. This coping style refers to others not only for help and advice but also for emotional support from the people around them. This response also criticizes and blames oneself for the things that happen and tends to give up when faced with a problem.

**Table 5**

Mean value, standard deviation of emotional reactivity strategies used by students

Action Strategy	Min	Standard Deviation (SP)
Emotional Orientation	2.2090	.46755

Based on Table 5, the results show that Task @ Problem Oriented Action Strategy is most often used by students (Mean = 2.2090, SP = 0.46755).

### 3.5 Relationship between Coping Strategies with Depression

**Table 6**

Correlation between coping strategies and depression

Variables	Min	Standard Deviation	Correlation (r)	P
Action Strategy	2.3926	.37272	.302**	.002
Depression	.6267	.48120		

Based on the result, showing the mean for coping strategies (Mean = 2.3926, SP = .37272) and mean for depression (Mean = .6267, SP = .48120). In addition, the significance between coping strategies and depression, which is the probability value of p, is lower than the alpha (a) significance level value, which is  $.002 < .01$ .

### 3.6 Hypothesis Testing Results

*Ho1: There is no difference in coping strategies according to gender*

**Table 7**

Differences in action strategy results according to gender

Gender	No	Min	Deviation Standards	t-value	Level Significant
Men	34	2.3159	.39410	-1.486	.141
Female	66	2.4321	.35787		

Table 7 shows the results of an independent sample t-test analysis to determine the difference in coping skills between male and female subjects. The results show that the mean coping scores between male subjects (Mean = 2.3159) and female subjects (Mean= 2.4321) is significantly different ( $t = -1.486$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ). This finding clearly shows that female subjects apply coping skills more than male subjects. The results show that there are differences in coping strategies between men and women. Therefore, the hypothesis is rejected.

### 3.6 Ho2: There is no coping strategy among high school students

**Table 8**

Results of action strategy use among high school students

Action Strategy	Min	Standard Deviation
Avoidance Orientation	1.8687	.43315
Task Orientation @ Problem	2.8660	.50895
Emotional Orientation	2.2090	.46755

Table 8 shows the coping strategies used by students on the Task @ Problem Orientation coping strategy got the highest mean value (Mean = 2.8660, SP = .50895), followed by the Emotional Orientation coping strategy (Mean = 2.2090, SP =.46755). Meanwhile, Avoidance Orientation coping strategy is less used by students (Mean = 1.8687, SP = .43315). The results of the analysis show that Task Orientation @ Problem coping is most often applied by students, followed by Emotional Orientation coping strategies then Avoidance Orientation coping strategies. The results show that there is a use of coping strategies used by students. Therefore, the hypothesis is rejected.

### 3.7 Ho3: There is no relationship between coping strategies and depression

**Table 9**

Correlation results between coping strategies and depression

Variables	Min	Standard Deviation	Correlation (r)	P
Action Strategy	2.3926	.37272	.302**	.002
Depression	.6267	.48120		

$P < .05$

Table 9 shows that there is a significant relationship between coping strategies and depression, the r obtained is .302\*\* while the probability of p is lower than the alpha ( $\alpha$ ) significance level value, that is,  $.002 < .01$ . Therefore, the results of this study found that there is a correlation produced which is r (.302\*\*),  $p < .05$ . The results show that there is a relationship between coping strategies and

depression among Form 4 students at a school in Chemor, Perak. Therefore, the hypothesis is rejected.

## 5. Analysis of Results

In Demographic Profile and Gender Differences in Coping Strategies, The study revealed that there is no significant difference in coping strategies between male and female students, although female students tend to use coping strategies slightly more (Mean = 2.4321) compared to males (Mean = 2.3159). This suggests that females may employ more emotion-focused strategies due to sociocultural factors and gender norms.

1. Types of Coping Strategies Used by Students Students primarily use task-oriented strategies (Mean = 2.8660), followed by emotion-oriented (Mean = 2.2090) and avoidance-oriented strategies (Mean = 1.8687). The preference for task-oriented strategies indicates a proactive approach to problem-solving among students, while the lower use of avoidance strategies suggests a general tendency to confront rather than evade problems.
2. Relationship Between Coping Strategies and Depression There is a significant positive correlation between coping strategies and depression ( $r = .302$ ,  $p < .05$ ). This indicates that while students employ various coping strategies, these may not always effectively mitigate depressive symptoms. This finding highlights the need for more effective and tailored coping mechanisms to address individual mental health challenges.

### *Differences in Action Strategies Based on Gender*

Differences in coping strategies used by respondents who are high school students do not show significant gender differences. Based on the descriptive statistical analysis that has been done on the respondents based on gender, the results show that the significant level obtained based on the data for male and female gender is only .141. Although there is no significant difference recorded between the sexes, it can be seen that the mean score value for the female gender is slightly higher at a value of 2.4321 compared to the male gender which is only at 2.3159. This shows that female students experience more pressure than male students. Therefore, the hypothesis for this specific purpose is rejected.

This is consistent with the facts released by the World Health Organization which states that the female gender is more likely to record the prevalence rate of mental disorders, especially depression at a higher level which is at 5.1% compared to men at 3.6% in general [9]. According to Girgus and Yang [7], this is because women are more likely to be weak from biological, psychological, and social aspects, thus making women more at risk of experiencing depression than men. Factors of change in women occur in several phases of a woman's life, namely when she reaches the age of puberty, when the menstrual process occurs, during the pregnancy process, and also when women reach the age of perimenopause [9].

In addition, the results of the National Morbidity Survey conducted in 2015 also show that the prevalence of mental disorders is higher among women with a percentage rate of 30.8% compared to the male gender at a percentage rate of 27.6% [9]. Girgus and Yang [7] also stated that the weaknesses caused by individual weaknesses, gender differences, differences in stress levels and differences in terms of response to stress that occur are also different which in turn lead to the prevalence of depression disorders between men and women [9]. This also tends to be caused by women's way of thinking which tends to be maladaptive [7]. In short, although the differences in coping strategies do not show significant differences between the two sexes, differences still exist

even at a small rate. This is consistent with the findings of a study conducted by Shamsaadal who also found that each student regardless of gender has the potential to deal with stress problems [3].

### *Action Strategies Used by High School Students*

Coping strategy refers to the strategy applied by high school students which consists of three (3) types namely Avoidance Oriented, Task Oriented @ Task Oriented, and Emotional Oriented (Emotion Oriented). Based on the data obtained from the survey form that was distributed to the respondents consisting of high school students, it was found that the coping strategy that focuses on Task @ Problem Orientation is the strategy most often practiced by the respondents when facing any issue. Task @ Problem Orientation refers to a strategy that consists of problems or tasks that are also accompanied by existing efforts to solve the problems faced. This strategy is the highest strategy with a mean score value of 2.8660. Therefore, the hypothesis established for this specific purpose is rejected.

Frydenberg and Lewis refer to coping strategies as one of the ways taken by teenagers to adapt to the biological, emotional, and social pressures that occur throughout their teenage years [4]. Based on the results obtained through the collected data, students are more likely to focus on efforts to find actions that need to be taken to help them solve problems that faced. Ali and Ahmad [3], stated that all individuals have their methods that are used to help them overcome the problems or stress they face. Therefore, the use of effective coping strategies based on the situation faced needs to be taken into account to prevent students from becoming depressed. Furthermore, coping has been well accepted as one of the important medical alternatives because of the positive effects that can be seen on a person's psychological health as stated by Charlton and Thompson [4]

Avoidance orientation coping strategies are the strategies that students do the least followed by coping strategies based on emotional orientation which are practiced by students in moderation. This shows that students are less fond of doing physical or cognitive activities to help divert their attention from the problems they face because they refuse to deal with the problems they face. However, students are also seen as preferring to seek advice and emotional support from others to help them overcome an issue. The students prefer to think about the actions that can be taken to help them solve the problems they face.

### *The Relationship Between Action Strategies and Depression*

Pearson's correlation analysis was performed between coping strategies and depression to examine the relationship between the two. Based on the analysis that has been carried out, there is a significant relationship between coping strategies and student depression with a correlation value (r) of .302\*\*\*. In short, the results of the analysis show that there is a significant positive relationship between coping strategies and depression among high school students. This further leads to the finding that the higher the use of coping strategies by students, the higher the level of depression that occurs in them. Therefore, the hypothesis for the third specific purpose of this study is rejected.

The student community that consists of various levels of education nowadays faces pressure from various sources which include many tasks, pressure of relationships or interactions between individuals, pressure due to the process of self-adjustment, and also pressure caused by financial factors [14]. Prolonged stress will be more severe if left to linger for a long period in addition to being able to lead to mental and physical disorders such as stress, anxiety, depression, headaches, and stomach aches [5]. Therefore, the implementation of coping strategies according to the situation by each student is important to prevent them from becoming more depressed.

Sanu and Rathakrishnan [15] also stated that the use of good coping strategies can help students positively, especially in the process of dealing with psychological stress problems. The use of high coping strategies is very important because it can help students to reduce the impact of situations that happen to them. This is in line with the findings of a study by Carnicer *et al.*, which states that the use of appropriate coping skills can reduce the effects of depression and the level of anxiety faced by individuals and further reduce the effects of existing psychological stress [15].

## 6. Conclusions

The study investigates coping strategies employed by high school students in Chemor Perak, focusing on gender differences and their correlation with depression. The results indicate no significant gender differences in overall coping strategies, although female students displayed a marginally higher use of such strategies. The most commonly utilized coping strategy was Task-Oriented, followed by Emotion-Oriented and Avoidance-Oriented strategies. There was a significant positive correlation between the use of coping strategies and levels of depression, highlighting the complex relationship between coping mechanisms and mental health. The findings suggest that while students are utilizing various coping strategies, these are not always sufficient in mitigating depressive symptoms, underlining the need for targeted mental health interventions. This research provides valuable insights for educators and counselors in developing support systems tailored to the specific needs of students, especially in the context of challenges exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

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