



The Correlation Between Stress and Emotional Eating Tendency in Final Students University During Thesis Writing

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Abstract. In the thesis process, many students are likely to experience stress or feel pressured and burned out. Such stress affects an individual's psychological state, prompting an emotional eating tendency. This study is aimed at identifying the relationship between stress and the tendency of emotional eating in senior university students who were currently writing their undergraduate thesis at Universitas Mercu Buana Yogyakarta. The study hypothesized that a positive correlation exists between stress and emotional eating tendency in senior year students during thesis. Subjects comprised 100 students at Universitas Mercu Buana Yogyakarta. Data was collected using stress and emotional eating scales that were initially tested for reliability, and analyzed using nonparametric testing with Spearman's Rho. The data analysis generated a correlation value $r_{xy} = 0,798$ ($p < 0,01$) between stress and emotional eating tendency, indicating that a positive association exists between stress and emotional eating tendency, thus confirming the hypothesis. Stress contributed to emotional eating at 63,7%, while the effective contribution of 36,3% was accounted by other factors.

Keywords: Stress · Emotional Eating Tendency · Final Students

1 Introduction

Thesis writing is a process that is serious yet haunting for many university students. It is known that in the process of thesis writing, many if not all students endure substantial levels of stress. A study by Alfian [1] showed that the constraints that university students experience are stemmed in the most critical period in their academic life. Such constraints may be caused by difficulties in arranging meetings with their thesis supervisor, their unpreparedness to undertake the thesis process, or due to the supervisor's rejection of the proposed thesis title. A study by Syarofi & Muniroh [2] found significant levels of stress and feeling under pressure that students experience while writing their theses. Such pressures may influence an individual's psychological state to varying degrees, and recent evidence has suggested that amongst people who are exposed to acute stress, out of the many existing coping mechanisms there is a trend to cope through emotional eating.

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Meule, Reichenberger, & Blechert [3] explained that emotional eating is every change in eating behavior (which may involve under- or over-eating). Emotional eating is a popular term used to describe individual eating habits affected by emotions, both positive and negative [4]. According to Serin [5], emotional eating is defined as a form of eating tendency to appear as an emotional response or response to emotions, which is caused not because of the feeling of hunger, proximity with eating time, or social needs. Usually the emotional response is because the individual feels worried, angry, and depression. Emotional eating itself is personal or individualistic in nature, which is triggered by various factors [6]. According to Meule, Reichenberger, & Blechert [3], emotional eating is categorized into 4 dimensions, being happiness, sadness, anger, and anxiety, which may have an interplay with various negative emotions.

Senior university students tend to experience emotional eating because at certain points during thesis writing, many endure stress or experience heightened stress sensitivity. This notion is supported by Wakhid and Trimawati's [7] study, whereby 37 of 76 (48,7%) of the study's samples who were currently in the process of thesis writing tend to display emotional eating behavior. Another study by Gryzela and Ariana [8] in samples of 198 female university students aged 21–22 years who were also working on their theses, it was found that a majority of study participants experienced stress in the moderate category were 147 subjects (74.24%). While the study participants who experienced mild stress category were 4.55% (9 subjects), and participants who experienced severe stress category were 21.21% (42 subjects). In addition, most of the study participants experienced moderate category of emotional eating, as many as 37.88% (75 subjects). Meanwhile, participants who experienced emotional eating in the very low category were 7.07% (14 subjects), the low category was 24.75% (49 subjects), the high category was 24.24% (48 subjects), and very high was 6.06% (12 subjects).

According to Kustanti and Gori [6], negative emotions elicit excessive eating behavior. If it is not managed well, emotional eating may have numerous negative consequences that impact a person's health, as both females and males tend to choose high-caloric unhealthy foods when they eat emotionally. Psychosomatic theories have suggested that food ameliorates anxiety and fear [9], although the effect may be temporary. Eventually, what is supposed to be a basic necessity develops into compounding meanings. There are also individuals who eat not only to fulfil caloric needs, but due to pressure from the social environment, or stress from emotionally constraining situations. When individuals eat when they are not hungry, it is necessary to note that the absence of hunger signals that the body does not require caloric intake. When this condition is continuously repeated, the body will receive excess calories that is then stored as fat and increases the risk of obesity. Whereas obesity itself potentially triggers various diseases such as hypertension, arthritis, cardiovascular diseases, biliary diseases, and diabetes. As suggested by McLaughlin [10], the negative consequences of emotional eating that individuals experience may reach the extent of lowered cognitive functioning, impaired mobility, obesity, insulin resistance, poor sleep quality, digestive issues, and mood changes.

Gavin [22] explained 8 factors that influence emotional eating, being stress, stuffing emotions, boredom or feelings of emptiness, childhood habit, social influence, cultural influence, sociodemographic characteristics, and personality. Among these, one of the most significant factors with ample scientific evidence is stress. Kustanti and Gori's [6]

asserted how the difficulties that students face in the process of thesis writing may cause a shift in mood and emotions that further results in stress, and this is common amongst students who are undertaking research projects. In this sense, stress increases a person's tendency for emotional eating or binge eating, or emotional eating itself worsens the experience stress. According to Sarafino and Smith [11], stress is a condition that is caused by an individual's interaction with the environment, triggering a perception of discrepancy between their demands, is stemmed in situations that affect an individual's biological, psychological, and social system. These induce discomfort or tension whereby individuals find it difficult to resolve the problems they face which results in distress. Emotional eating is an individual's response toward stress in which such a response is ineffective and manifested through binge eating. When the causes of stress are not optimally addressed will cause coping mechanisms to be ineffective. Coping is an individual's defence mechanism toward changes from external or internal sources [12]. From a physiological standpoint, ineffective coping mechanisms such as stress will stimulate the brain to release cortisol through the adrenal glands, which leads to increased appetite and certain cravings, including the motivation to eat [13]. Although some people may experience loss of appetite, stress is still likely to cause emotional eating. This occurs when someone emotionally vents through food when they are not in a hungry state that results in binge eating. Such actions not only satisfy hunger but it is also a distraction to experience pleasure, reduce stress, ameliorate negative emotionality, or as a self-reward.

Bennett et al. [14] explained that a person's negative emotions may influence their eating behavior. In some cases, emotional eating is a means to divert attention from unwanted negative emotions so that individuals may feel better. In stressful conditions, the shift of emotional states leads to the possibility of using food as a strategy to resolve such negative emotions. Under these conditions, people will eat when they are not physically hungry to satisfy their emotions through food, to relieve or satisfy the urge to eat (or cravings) as a result of the stress they experience. This idea is also supported by Syarofi and Muniroh [2] in samples of university students who majored in nutrition at Universitas Airlangga, which found that the higher the stress levels that university students experience during thesis writing, the greater the likeliness for these students to exhibit binge eating behavior or emotional eating.

Based on the literature above, the authors of the present study aim to investigate the association between stress and emotional eating tendencies in senior university students who are conducting their thesis. The research question to be addressed in this study is: will a positive correlation exist between stress and emotional eating tendency in senior year students during thesis writing at Universitas Mercu Buana Yogyakarta?

This study's objective is to identify the relationship between emotional eating tendencies in senior university students who are in the process of thesis writing. As for the benefits of this research it is theoretically expected to contribute toward the development of both insights and science-fields; Especially for the development of clinical psychological stress related to emotional eating trends. It is also hoped to be a further study source that will develop the topic of stress relations with emotional eating tendency on finish - level students who are doing the thesis. While it is technically expected that an understanding should be given to students if a stress relationship is found with the

emotional eating tendency on the student preparing the script, and it is expected that the student doing the script will manage stress well so as to minimize the emotional tendency to eat.

This study hypothesizes that a positive relationship will exist between stress and emotional eating in senior university students during thesis writing. The higher the reported stress level, the greater the students' tendency of emotional eating. Conversely, the lower the stress levels, the lower the students' tendency of emotional eating.

2 Research Methods

Subjects consisted of 100 final semester students who were currently undertaking their thesis at Universitas Mercu Buana Yogyakarta. A snowball sampling technique was applied. Snowball sampling is a method to obtain samples where existing participants recruit potential subjects who are still their acquaintances, also often referred to as chain-referral sampling [15]. Prior to filling in the study's measurements, respondents were required to fill in an informed consent form to ensure voluntary participation in this study.

Data was obtained using self-report measures (i.e. a stress scale and an emotional eating scale). The stress scale is based on aspects proposed by Sarafino and Smith [16], which consists of biological and psychological aspects. Whereas the emotional eating scale is based on the dimensions formulated by Meule, Reichenberger, and Blecher [3], consisting of 1) happiness, 2) sadness, 3) anger, 4) anxiety. Both instruments are measured on Likert scales. The scales were developed into two item forms; items that support the measured object (favorable items) and items that contradict the measured object (unfavorable items). The scales are measured on four points, ranging from Very True, True, Not True, and Very Untrue for all favorable and unfavorable items. For favorable items, Very True is scored 4, True is scored 3, Not True is scored 2, and Very Untrue is scored 1. Whereas for unfavorable items, Very True is scored 1, True is scored 2, Not True is scored 3, and Very Untrue is scored 4.

Prior to use, both scales were tested on a group of subjects to determine its validity and reliability. The subjects comprised 50 university students of Universitas Mercu Buana Yogyakarta. In the emotional eating scale, 30 out of 48 items were deemed valid while 18 items were to be excluded from further use. The emotional eating scale's validity coefficient increased from 0,307 to 0,732, whereas the reliability coefficient showed (α) 0,864. Meanwhile, the stress scale had 29 out of 36 items were deemed valid while 7 items were excluded from further use. The stress scale's validity coefficient increased from 0,306 to 0,670, whereas the reliability coefficient showed (α) 0,896. It was concluded that the emotional eating and stress scales were valid and reliable, and deemed acceptable for further use in this study. Data was obtained through distributions using Google Forms to all respondents. Validity testing was done through expert judgment, whereas reliability was measured through Cronbach's Alpha.

Data was analyzed with SPSS for Windows through nonparametric testing using Spearman's Rho. This correlation method is used to test the hypothesis that proposes an inter-variable correlations in non-parametric data [17]. Additionally, an ANOVA was also done to compare the two variables. The data analysis used was aimed at identifying the

Table 1. Research test

Research Test	Research Variable	Score	Coefficient of Significance	Results
Normality	Emotional Eating	KSZ = 0.098	p = 0.020 (p < 0.050)	Abnormal
	Stress	KSZ = 0.081	p = 0.101 (p > 0.050)	Normal
Linearity	Stress with emotional eating	F = 173.414	p = 0.000	Linear
Correlation	Stress with emotional eating	(r) = 0.798	p = 0.000 (p < 0.01)	Positive relation

relationship between stress and emotional eating tendency in senior university students during thesis writing.

3 Results and Discussion

In the analysis of the emotional eating scale, the hypothetical data would generate a minimum score of $1 \times 30 = 30$, and a maximum score of $4 \times 30 = 120$. The hypothetical mean would be $(120 + 30) : 2 = 75$, and standard deviation of $(120 - 30) : 6 = 15$. Whereas the empirical data generated a minimum score of 37, a maximum score of 113, and average of 70,33 with a standard deviation of 13,444. As for the stress scale's analysis, the hypothetical data would generate a minimum score of $1 \times 29 = 29$, and a maximum score of $4 \times 29 = 116$. The hypothetical mean would be $(116 + 29) : 2 = 72,5$ and standard deviation of $(116 - 29) : 6 = 14,3$. Whereas the empirical data generated a minimum score of 29, a maximum score of 107, and empirical mean of 73,19 with a standard deviation of 13,553 (Table 1).

Normality testing for emotional eating data generated KS-Z = 0,098 (p < 0,05). While stress data generated KS-Z = 0,081 (p > 0,05). This indicated that the stress data was normally distributed, and the emotional eating data was not normally distributed, hence the authors will test the hypothesis using non-parametric testing.

Variable linearity tests for emotional eating and stress generated a value of F = 173,414 (p < 0,05), indicating that emotional eating and stress show a linear relationship. Based on correlation analysis using Spearman's Rho, a positive and significant correlation was shown between stress and emotional eating in our samples of senior university students during thesis writing, with a value of r = 0,798 (p < 0,01). This result therefore confirms our hypothesis. A positive relationship between stress and emotional eating tendency shows that the higher the stress levels, the greater the tendency of emotional eating in senior university students during thesis writing at Universitas Mercu Buana Yogyakarta.

Stress is a variable that positively contributes to emotional eating. This finding corresponds to prior studies that assessed these variables. A study by Musyafira [18] asserted that a positive association between stress and emotional eating exists. In line with this,

findings by Gryzela and Ariana [8] demonstrated that stress and emotional eating are significantly and positively correlated. A study by Syarofi and Muniroh [2] also showed a significant relationship between stress and emotional eating.

According to Gavin [22], one factor that influences emotional eating is stress, and stress also affects emotional eating. Corresponding to the literature, Bennett et al. [14] suggested that an individual's negative emotions influence eating behavior. This is also supported by a prior study by Syarofi and Muniroh [2] that found how stress was able to contribute to emotional eating up to 44,8% in samples of university students who were in the process of writing their thesis. Furthermore, Kustanti and Gori [6] stated that the difficulties that students experience in the thesis process may affect their mood or emotional shifts, so it is common for students to experience stress. As put forward by Latter (2012), ineffective coping mechanisms toward stress will stimulate the brain to release cortisol through the adrenal glands, which increases appetite and hence the urge to eat. Aside from this being the brain's deceptive way of telling the body that it requires more calories to function under stressful conditions, emotional eating could be an individual's way to divert attention from negative emotions to generate a sense of pleasure. In stressful conditions, shifts in emotions may trigger individuals to use eating as a behavioral strategy to ease negative emotions. Individuals who eat when they are not physically hungry are essentially satisfying their emotional drive through food intake, in order to alleviate or channel stress from the conditions they face. In other words, an individual's coping mechanism will increase the likeliness to crave for savory, sweet, and fatty foods in excess.

Lazarevich et al. [19] explained that when experiencing stress or negative emotions such as sadness, anxiety, or loneliness, individuals tend to eat emotionally. This means that emotional eating is more of a coping strategy rather than a means to alleviate hunger, and people may also use food to produce a calming effect to alleviate stress. Essentially, coping strategies can be divided into two types; problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping. This study focuses on the latter; i.e. emotion-focused coping through emotional eating. According to Bakhtiar and Asriani [20], emotion-focused coping is a coping strategy that focuses on compensating or dealing with emotional stress when an individual interacts with the environment. In this sense, stress triggers an individual's tendency of emotional eating as they are rewarded from the food that brings a sense of comfort.

Sarafino and Smith [11] defined stress as being the condition which results when the interaction between the person and the environment leads the individual to perceive a discrepancy - whether real or not - between the demands of a situation and the resources of the person's biological, psychological and social systems. This also shows that the discomfort and tension that hampers a person's ability to resolve the problem or issue at hand, which then induces stress. Stress is the physical and psychological reaction as a response toward a demand that disrupts stability and triggers tension [3]. Lantara and Nusran [21] defined stress as an internal condition caused by environmental, physical, demands, and an uncontrollable and potentially harmful condition. Furthermore, Sarafino and Smith [16] formulated the aspects of stress as being both biological and psychological.

Based on the present study's results, it can be concluded that the findings correspond to prior research that examined the same variables, being the correlation between stress and emotional eating. According to the literature previously explained, the authors concluded that the stress that university students experience during thesis writing at Universitas Mercu Buana Yogyakarta may significantly affect a student's tendency toward emotional eating. Confirmation of the study's hypothesis was also supported by the statistical contribution of stress toward emotional eating at 63,7% in our samples, while the remaining 36,3% is affected by other factors not examined in this study. Such factors that may influence emotional eating according to Gavin [22] include stuffing emotion, boredom or loneliness, childhood habits, social influences, cultural influences, sociodemographic characteristics, and personality.

This study also revealed the distribution of categories for both emotional eating and stress scales. For the emotional eating scale, it was identified that 6% (6 subjects) were in the high category, 79% (79 subjects) in the moderate category, and 15% (15 subjects) were in the low category. It was concluded that the majority of senior university students at Universitas Mercu Buana Yogyakarta who were undertaking a thesis were in the moderate category of emotional eating. Whereas respondents who showed high emotional eating scores may show indications of an emotional eating disorder, while respondents with low emotional eating scores are less likely to show indications of an emotional eating disorder [14].

Meanwhile, based on the distribution of the stress scale scores, it was identified that 14% (14 subjects) were in the high category of stress, 79% (79 subjects) were in the moderate category, and 7% (7 subjects) were in the low category. It can be concluded that the majority of the senior university students' stress scores at Universitas Mercu Buana Yogyakarta who were writing their thesis were in the moderate category. Moderate scores show that the students' experience of stress is ineffectively managed. They may have yet found activities that function as stress release, so it may lead to their inability to differentiate between physical hunger and emotional hunger due to unstable emotionality which is then manifested through emotional eating. This is conducted to induce a sense of comfort due to the stressful emotions and conditions they are under.

Despite the positive findings, this study is not without limitations, which presents a certain degree of bias in the findings. On a methodological standpoint, correlation studies show have low strength in the quality of evidence due to the inability to provide causal inferences between stress and emotional eating. Additionally, as correlational designs only focus on a specific point in time, changes in respondents' behavior overtime were not assessed, thus it is unknown as to whether stress and emotional persisted after thesis completion. The nature of self-reports are also known to be at high risk of bias and that there were no controls over the measurement of stress as an exposure in this study, hence more objective measures can be included in further studies to substantiate the degree of stress that is relevant to the research question (e.g. biomarkers such as heart rate variability analysis or cortisol levels; behavioral coding; food journals). This may help control for over- or underreporting of stress. It may also be necessary to include concurrent life events as they may affect stress reporting (i.e. respondents may or may not be exposed to other acute or chronic stressors that reflected in their stress scores), and these should be controlled for in the statistical analysis as confounders. Lastly, controlling

for sociocultural and demographic characteristics may be necessary to reduce bias, as certain cultures and economic classes may have specific characteristics in terms of eating practices or consumption capacity.

4 Conclusion

The study's findings were able to confirm the proposed hypothesis, whereby a positive and significant relationship was found between stress and emotional eating tendency in senior university students during thesis writing. This study also revealed the distribution of emotional eating and stress scale's categories. It showed that a majority of Universitas Mercu Buana Yogyakarta's senior students showed moderate levels of stress and emotional eating tendency during thesis writing. Moderate scores show that students who experience stress do not apply adequate stress management efforts. The stress variable in this study contributes to 63,7% toward emotional eating tendency. Whereas the 36,3% is affected by other variables in this study. Such factors may include, but are not limited to, 1) stuffing emotions, 2) boredom or feelings of loneliness, 3) childhood habits, social influence, cultural influence, or sociodemographic characteristics, and 4) personality traits.

Researchers hope students who are doing their prescriptions can manage stress well. By focusing on positive habits and endeavoring to avoid emotional eating behavior as an attempt to divert stress, even though emotional eating may provide comfort and may lower stress but need to be recognized that the effects they produce are temporary and have a negative effect on health. For further researchers, this study may be used for scientific studies related to stress with the emotional eating. The weakness in this study is the normal test on the emotional eating scale has an abnormal frequency of data. It is hoped that further research could expand the subject's retrieval to get more general data, thereby representing a larger population.

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