

## Psychological factors associated with students' withdrawal from Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia: A qualitative study

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### Abstract

The withdrawal from the Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) examination presents a major public health concern. This study aims to explore and identify the psychosocial problems contributing to students' withdrawal from SPM. A transcendental phenomenological qualitative research design was used in this study. Six participants were recruited using the criterion sampling method, and the data were collected through semi-structured interviews online. The data were transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis, and three main themes and two sub-themes each emerged. The main themes were (1) educational detachment; (2) academic pressure and school-related anxiety; and (3) external burdens and fragile support systems. The results from this study can be utilised by schools, mental health agencies, and other relevant bodies to formulate tailored interventions aimed at combating the concerning rate of no-appearances.

**Keywords:** Academic stress, psychological factors, Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM), withdrawal

### Introduction

Examinations like the General Certificate of Education Advanced Level (GCE "A level") in the United Kingdom, the High School Diploma in the United States, the West African Senior School Certificate Examination for West Africa (WASSCE), the National Examination Council in Nigeria, Canadian high school examinations in Canada, and also the Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) in Malaysia are exit examinations designed to assess students' understanding of various subjects that were made for final-year secondary or high school students (Kellaghan & Greaney, 2019). These exams were designed to be tickets to higher education and to develop in the students a range of abilities and skills that are prized by universities and employers (Woessmann, 2018). As these examinations are important for student achievement and educational growth, there have been reported associated mental health challenges (Matti et al., 2022).

In Malaysia, the Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) is the main national exam students take at the end of their secondary schooling. It is administered centrally and provides a record of students' academic performance. They determine if a student is eligible for further studies, are a factor in scholarship applications, and are often required for job applications (Jabatan Digital Negara, 2024; Lembaga Peperiksaan Kementerian Pelajaran Malaysia, 2010). In recent times, student participation in this examination has been increasing and has sparked debates. Statistics reveal a concerning upward trend; in 2021, over 10,000 students, or 2.7% of 392,837 registered candidates, did not attend the examination (Bernama, 2023). This number rose sharply in 2022, with nearly 15,000 students, or 3.8%, failing to show up for SPM 2022 (Norila Daud, 2023). Although recent data from 2024 shows a slight decrease to 10,160 absentees, this still represents a significant number of students withdrawing from the examination (Hakim Mahari & Nur Najlaa Mohd Rahmat, 2024).

Some of the identified causes of these withdrawals are the growing tendency in the young generation to view education solely as a means to excel in exams and neglecting its role in fostering personal growth, as identified by the University College Sedaya International (UCSI Poll Research Centre, 2023). According to this poll, 32% of the respondents believed that pursuing tertiary education was not as beneficial as previous generations thought. Additionally, 6% expressed a desire to stop studying due to exams, because while gearing up for an

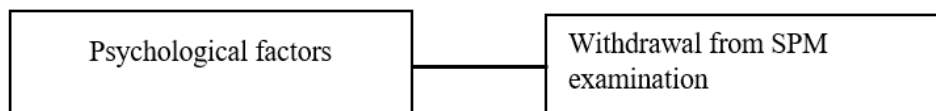
examination, students are reported vulnerable to the deterioration of their psychological well-being, with academic stress and examination anxiety (Yatkin et al., 2023; Bentil et al., 2020) and depression (Wuthrich et al., 2021) being the most correlated to mental distress (Chyu & Chen, 2022). After all, once there are tests and examinations, anxiety will emerge and fester (Bentil et al., 2020). Furthermore, students have a higher tendency to withdraw when they experience symptoms of psychological distress (Parviainen et al., 2020), negative affectivity (Souza et al., 2022), fear (Woods et al., 2019), and poor sleep (Hamilton et al., 2021).

So far, there are no substitutes for exit examinations; therefore, the consequences of students failing to complete their studies can have far-reaching implications for both individuals and the nation at large. They are likely to lack certain skills and knowledge, be unemployed, earn less, be unable to attain higher standards and be held back in career readiness and advancement (Uppal, 2017; Hyslop, 2014). These consistent outcomes make it imperative to understand the associated psychological problems and reasons for withdrawal from this important SPM examination by students in Malaysia.

## Conceptual framework

**Figure 1**

*Conceptual framework of expected interactions between the variables*



The illustration in Figure 1 above represents the interconnection expected to exist between the psychological factors that are likely to be attributed to student's withdrawal from SPM examinations. It shows how the psychological factors that they felt at the time influenced their decision regarding sitting for the exit examination, which for this study is withdrawal from the SPM.

## Research objectives

This study aims to explore and identify the psychological factors that contribute to the student's decision to withdraw from SPM.

## Methodology

### *Research design*

The study utilised a transcendental phenomenological qualitative research design. Transcendental phenomenological research was adopted because it is about understanding how people experience the world. By studying people's direct experiences, we can learn more about the meaning and significance of everyday things. It explicates the essence of human experience (Moerer-Urdahl & Creswell, 2004). An ethical approval was obtained. Ethical approval was obtained from the Human Research Ethics Committee at Sultan Idris Educational University with a reference number of 2024-0386-01. A semi-structured interview protocol was specifically designed for this research.

### *Respondents of the study*

Using the criterion sampling technique, the participants were Malaysians between 18 and 22 years old who withdrew from the SPM examination or any related examination, like the IGCSE (International General Certificate of Secondary Education) or skills certificate, within the last 3 years (2022 to 2024). The researcher tried to recruit using volunteers (posting flyers on social media platforms) and snowballing techniques, but many of them were not interested in talking about their withdrawal from SPM. Due to time constraints in finishing up this study, the final sample size was six, which is still acceptable for a qualitative study (Young & Casey, 2018; Boddy, 2016).

Upon seeing the flyers on social media, some participants reached out directly to the researcher, following confirmation of eligibility and obtaining their informed consent, which included approval of voice recording to take part in the study. Participants completed a Participant Registration Form via Google Forms to confirm their fulfilment of the interview criteria. Subsequently, the interview schedules were then arranged based on the mutual availability of both the researcher and the participants. Six individuals participated after fulfilling

the criteria of being a Malaysian citizen between the ages of 18 and 22 years old and did not undertake the SPM or any other equivalent high school-based examinations, including the IGCSE or skills certificate, from 2019 to 2024. One-on-one, semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant. To accommodate participant preference and comfort, interviews were conducted either via Google Meet or phone calls, and they were briefed on the research objectives and the interview guide.

### ***Transcription and translation***

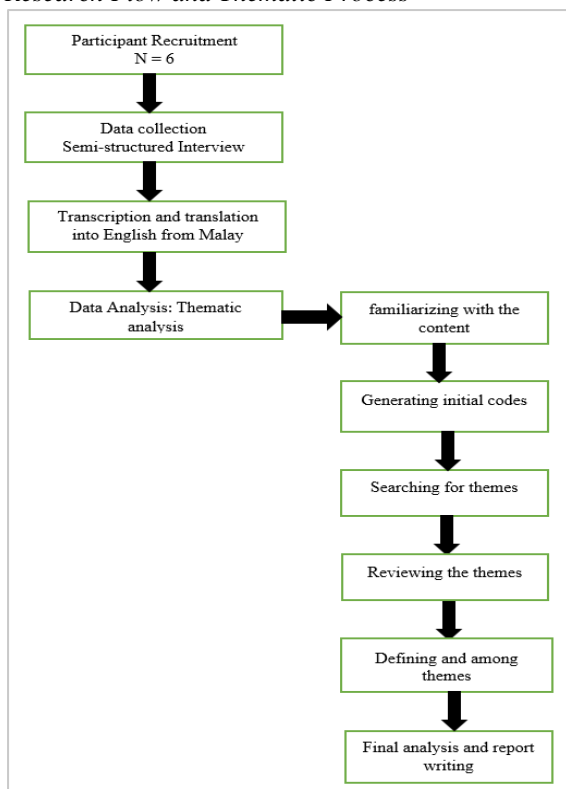
The interview was in Malay, and it ranged from 50 to 60 minutes. The recordings were transcribed, and participants were assigned codes to protect their identities. The transcriptions were translated into English for analysis. Finally, a thematic analysis was conducted on the transcribed and translated data to identify key themes and insights related to the psychological problems that contributed to the student's withdrawal from the SPM examination (*as seen in Figure 2 below*).

In the transcriptions, the English translation was italicised below the original Malay text. Instances, where English was originally spoken by either the interviewer or participants, were also italicised in the transcription. Pauses were marked with triple punctuations [...] and interruptions or breaks were indicated with a dash -. Content not uttered during the interview was included in square brackets for clarity (e.g., *That's right, I went into Accounting [stream]*), and quotation marks were used to signify direct quotes from the participants (e.g., *Then I thought, "Whatever, I'll just skip school."*).

While familiarising with the content, the transcriptions were scanned, whereas meaningful and relevant content was highlighted to detect patterns. These patterns were then analysed and categorised as codes, subsequently grouped into themes based on commonalities among the participants. Ensuring that the codes related perfectly to the themes was crucial for maintaining coherence. The manual framework by Braun and Clarke (2006) of thematic analysis guided the process of identifying patterns of psychological problems associated with withdrawal from SPM as reported by the participants. An inductive and semantic form of thematic analysis was applied to identify and describe themes within and across participants' narratives. The final step involved reviewing and refining the initial themes by analysing the interview data, naming the established themes, and interpreting them in conjunction with relevant literature. This comprehensive approach to thematic analysis enabled the identification of key psychological issues that contributed to students' decisions to withdraw from the SPM examination, providing valuable insights into the underlying factors of this phenomenon.

**Figure 2**

#### *Research Flow and Thematic Process*



## Findings and discussions

The participants were two females and four males; their age range was between 18 and 22 years old, with all participants identifying as Malay. All six participants completed their interviews within the 60-minute timeframe. The interviews were designed to be laid-back and conversational, with prepared questions followed by probing follow-up questions to elicit more detailed responses about their withdrawal from school and the SPM examination. Interestingly, while discussing their reasons for withdrawal, several common themes emerged that significantly impacted their emotions and academic performance.

Thematic analysis delved beyond the initial focus on predefined variables such as academic pressure and examination anxiety, revealing a broader range of psychological factors contributing to students' withdrawal from SPM. To accurately represent this richness in the data, the results are presented in a thematic format, identifying and exploring the key themes that led to the participants' withdrawal from the SPM examination. Three main themes emerged from the thematic content analysis, reflecting the reasons behind their decisions to leave school without completing the SPM.

To further explore the themes, the themes will be presented and supported with several excerpts, carefully chosen from the interview transcriptions to better illustrate and substantiate the identified themes. These excerpts vividly demonstrate the themes and provide a deeper understanding of the factors that influenced the participants' decisions. For readability, any non-essential words or hesitations (e.g., 'uhm', 'like') have been removed from the excerpts.

### ***Theme 1: Educational detachment***

This theme encapsulates the participants' journey from initial disinterest to a complete detachment from academic life. Educational detachment refers to a state where students exhibit a significant lack of interest or involvement in their educational activities. This detachment can manifest as a decline in motivation to attend classes, a sense of detachment from academic goals, and a reduced effort in schoolwork. Such detachment leads to a withdrawal from the academic environment, resulting in decreased participation in school-related activities and interactions. This phenomenon can be understood through two interrelated subthemes: lack of motivation and chronic absenteeism.

#### **Lack of motivation**

During the interviews, it was observed that participants displayed a profound apathy towards their education and described a sense of detachment from academic goals. This apathy towards education was evident in their narratives, where they expressed a lack of enthusiasm for school and academic work. For example, Participant D expressed not feeling stressed about studying because he rarely attended classes.

*"I don't think I ever felt stressed about studying (...) because I rarely attended classes too. There's nothing to be stressed about" (Participant D).*

*"I was okay with the other subjects, but subjects like Math or Accounting, I was not okay at all. I just sat quietly in Accounting class" (Participant A).*

On top of that, a few participants mentioned starting to work at a young age to earn money, which contributed to their loss of interest in school. They expressed a preference for earning an income over continuing their studies, finding the immediate financial benefits more appealing than the long-term academic, which deviated their motivation for the commitment required for the SPM.

*"Okay, it's like this; once I started working, the need to go to school didn't exist anymore. I was too lazy to go to school... I had already started skipping school by then, and I wasn't in the mood to even attend school. I had also started working at that time, so, waking up in the morning to go to school, I already felt really lazy to go" (Participant C).*

*"Want this, want that; I can buy everything because I'm working now, and I have my own money. So, I feel too lazy to go to school" (Participant E).*

#### **Chronic absenteeism**

Beyond simply dropping out, frequent absenteeism and intentional non-attendance also emerged as significant indicators of a student's educational detachment. Many participants highlighted their chronic absenteeism as both a cause and consequence of their disengagement. For some participants, their initial detachment from school spiralled into a pattern of habitual absence, which proved to lead to more severe consequences like expulsion. Once expelled, the students expressed little interest in returning for the SPM exam, solidifying their withdrawal from the education system.

*"I had various issues attending school, I went to school, and then I didn't just drop out, I was expelled. Then after being expelled, I didn't go back to school and eventually quit" (Participant D).*

*"They gave me a choice to either get expelled or drop out, so I chose to drop out. Then I thought about going to a school near here. Find a school that's nearby. After that, when I had been staying at home for a week or two, and had been playing and all, I started to feel lazy about going to school" (Participant E).*

The findings on educational detachment suggest a noticeable decline in participants' motivation to attend classes, which served as a precursor to their eventual withdrawal from the SPM examination, reflecting a deep disinterest in their educational progress (Nasir et al., 2020). This disinterest was both influenced by and contributed to their sense of disconnection from their academic goals (Mughal, 2020). Consequently, such detachment can manifest in behaviours like skipping classes, which further deepens the disconnection from school. Additionally, the analysis revealed that participants who juggled work alongside studies were often motivated by immediate financial rewards, perceiving the SPM examination as irrelevant to their future aspirations. This finding resonates with the findings of Mendoza-Saltos and Castillo-Bravo (2022), who highlighted a correlation between working and absenteeism from classes, paralleling the experiences of some participants in this study. For these participants, prioritising work over academic pursuits may have led them to believe that their early income holds a greater promise for future success than the SPM examination itself (Arslan, 2021), especially among secondary school students under the age of 18 (Boyacı, 2019).

This current study sheds new light on the complex dynamics of chronic absenteeism, disengagement, and expulsion in the context of students withdrawing from high-stakes exams such as the SPM, as existing research by Arslan and Peker (2023) highlights absenteeism as a contributing factor to overall school dropout rates. Similarly, Karacabey and Boyacı (2019) observed that absenteeism likely exacerbated their academic struggles and distanced them from school activities, ultimately contributing to their decision to withdraw entirely. Building upon this understanding, the current study highlights how expulsion can act as a tipping point, pushing already disengaged students to completely withdraw from the educational system, particularly in the context of high-stakes exams.

## ***Theme 2: Academic pressure and school-related anxiety***

The second theme that emerged from the interviews with participants who withdrew from the SPM examination was centred around the psychological and emotional challenges faced by students in grappling with the pressure within the academic environment, leading to a withdrawal from formal education. This theme can be explored through two interconnected subthemes: The Suffocating Effects of Social Anxiety and Bullying and Performance Pressure and the Descent into Isolation.

### **The suffocating effects of school-related anxiety and bullying**

At the core of this subtheme is the complex interplay of the significant factors contributing to overwhelming academic pressure and school-related anxiety. Participants shared having struggles with social interactions, often due to a deep-seated fear and shyness that made class participation daunting.

*"I thought of wanting to escape. That's all I thought about. I couldn't take it anymore with the boys, who always bothered me, so I think the fear came from the boys too. I'm an introvert, shy, so when the boys bothered me verbally and looked at me, I became afraid of that kind of assault" (Participant A).*

*"Once I was placed in the group [for coursework], it was okay because there was no choice. But before that, I was incredibly nervous to the point of experiencing physical symptoms. I was so nervous that my hands started sweating and then I got a stomach ache" (Participant B).*

During the interviews, participants reported that bullying significantly heightened their fear, creating a hostile school environment. This not only led to a desire to avoid social interactions but also contributed to a profound sense of isolation. Coupled with the psychological strain of academic performance, this isolation made continuing with the SPM examination seem untenable, ultimately leading to their withdrawal.

*"I feel like... it's useless for me to still go to school and face that thing every day. Every time I come [to school], I start to get back to studying; they will start ridiculing me, so I was already not motivated to study" (Participant F).*

*"Okay, when I decided to drop out of school, I was already at a point where I couldn't reconcile with that person [the bully], and I also really don't have the mood to study anymore. (...) When you're in that kind of situation [being bullied], whatever you study doesn't stick anymore. It doesn't sink in. It just doesn't go into your brain-just negative! The whole atmosphere there was negative for me, negative" (Participant C).*

### **Performance pressure and the descent into isolation**

A few participants also reported feeling overwhelming pressure to perform well in exams, which was difficult due to mental health issues and a lack of support. The pressure to perform well academically weighed heavily on the participants, contributing to heightened anxiety that manifested in various ways. Some participants reported reluctance to engage in exam preparation due to performance anxiety.

*"If I sacrifice my mental health to continue facing this every day until SPM, I don't know if my results will even end up nice or not. (...) I think it's better that way; that's why I decided to drop out of school. Because if I stay in school, my mental health will get worse, and it'll be tougher"* (Participant F).

*"(...) It's like when SPM was mentioned, when am I going to sit for it? I feel anxious"* (Participant B).

During the interviews, participants shared that their fear of failure in academic situations, such as presentations and exams, often led to physical symptoms like trembling and difficulty focusing, which hindered their performance. One participant described their experience:

*"Then, when I wanted to present my lesson, I trembled a lot. My teeth were shaking, my hands were shaking, I couldn't answer, and I couldn't present anything because my head became blank. (...) I feel like I'm more okay than I am at school. I feel like my social interactions are okay; everything is okay; I feel like there's no problem when I'm at home or in other places except at school"* (Participant A).

Additionally, participants also reported that struggling to understand academic material significantly increased their stress levels, leading to feelings of being overwhelmed and incapable of meeting academic expectations. This self-doubt and sense of being overwhelmed further eroded their motivation and perseverance. One participant explained:

*"I understand in class, but when I try to do it myself, I can't. Then from there, I somehow felt worried, started studying on my own, and then it didn't stop"* (Participant B).

When asked if the pressure of not understanding brought them down, Participant B confirmed, *"Oh yeah."*

The researchers identified that participants stopped attending school due to bullying, which resulted in social isolation and eventually led them to decide to drop out of school, giving up the SPM examination entirely as acknowledged in the correlation between negative peer relationships and academic stress (García-Ros et al., 2018; Banks & Smyth, 2015). This current study reveals that bullying can culminate in both school and examination withdrawal, significantly expanding upon the existing body of research by demonstrating the severe consequences of bullying on students' educational paths.

Furthermore, this study revealed that participants felt overwhelmed by the pressure to perform well in exams, compounded by existing mental health issues and a lack of support. This pressure manifested as debilitating performance anxiety, driven by the fear of failure in academic situations, which led some participants to withdraw from examination preparation entirely. These findings resonate with the work of Banks and Smyth (2015), who documented heightened stress levels among students in their final year of school.

Just like other studies found anxiety as a big deal for high school seniors (Buch et al., 2019), some participants in this study described experiencing a crippling fear of failure in academic settings, particularly exams and presentations, with this fear often accompanied by physical symptoms like sweating and trembling, leading some to withdraw from these situations altogether. This emphasises the strong association between examinations and heightened stress levels characterised by worry, nervousness, and fear of failure, potentially influencing students to withdraw from the SPM exit examination written in the final year.

### **Theme 3: External burdens and fragile support systems**

This final theme explores how external burdens and the fragility of support systems can contribute to students' withdrawal from the SPM examination. A strong support network, made up of family, friends, and teachers, helps students cope with challenges. However, when this support system is weak or fractured, students may feel isolated and overwhelmed, which could potentially lead to withdrawal from the SPM exam. Without encouragement and guidance from their support system, students struggle to navigate their challenges and persevere through difficult times. This theme can be further explored through two subthemes: 'The Ripple Effects of Family Strain' and 'Cracks in the Support System'.

#### **The ripple effects of family strain**

Some participants described how a turbulent home environment impacted their academic journey. Experiences like parental divorce or constant conflict at home created emotional turmoil that disrupted their focus on their academics. These disruptions often led to difficulty managing emotions, resulting in issues like school absences, declining grades, and ultimately withdrawal from school.

*"I've seen that there are problems at home, like fighting and arguments between the parents. Those emotions were carried over to school. (...) At home, I face negative things, and at school too, so it turned out like that. I didn't know how to handle it anymore" (Participant C).*

*"I was so annoyed with him [brother]. We were always fighting, not to mention the fights with my parents. So, I decided, I ran away to my friend's house for a few days" (Participant F).*

### **Cracks in the support system**

The interviews highlighted the critical role of a strong support system in a student's academic journey. Participants noted that the absence of supportive peers or the influence of negative peer pressure significantly impacted their motivation and led to withdrawal from the SPM examination. One participant described how negative peer pressure encouraged behaviours like skipping classes, which over time diminished their interest in attending school and led to expulsion, thereby disqualifying them from taking the exam.

*"I followed my friends. I was naughty, going with them here and there. Skipping classes, smoking in the toilets... I felt like staying in class, sleeping, or whatever. My friends invited me to hang out in the toilet, so I just followed. just went with it, doing whatever my friends did. When they ask me to do this, I would do it" (Participant E).*

Furthermore, the interviews revealed that the absence of close friends in a new school environment can create a significant sense of isolation, decreasing motivation and impacting students' willingness to attend school. Without a familiar social support network, students often struggle to feel connected, leading to feelings of loneliness and isolation.

*"The reason for dropping out of school was because there were no friends from elementary school with me. I didn't have the mood to go to school because there were no friends from primary school that I knew" (Participant D).*

Lastly, the interviews also highlighted negative experiences with teachers as a significant contribution factor, demonstrating how a lack of positive relationships with educators can weaken a student's support system. Feeling unseen or ridiculed by teachers created a sense of alienation and eroded students' trust in their educators as sources of guidance and support.

*"Whether or not I finished my schoolwork, she [the teacher] didn't care about me. It was like I was invisible to her. (...) If I have to face all this ridicule and ostracization every day, what's the point of having teachers if I have to learn everything myself?" (Participant F).*

It became evident that family dynamics and interpersonal tensions contribute significantly to students' decisions to withdraw from the SPM examination. These stressors overwhelm students' emotional and mental resources, making it difficult for them to cope effectively (Yuan, 2019). Moreover, the lack of adequate support systems intensifies these challenges, potentially influencing students to opt out of crucial examinations like the SPM.

Participants in the current study who withdrew from the SPM examination described an unstable home environment marked by family conflict. This emotional strain made it difficult for them to manage their emotions at school, leading to behavioural issues like skipping classes. Furthermore, the lack of a supportive home environment contributed to the loss of motivation to study (Foqara, 2023), resulting in their withdrawal from school altogether.

Apart from the home environment, the findings of the current study highlight the detrimental impact of a weak peer support system on students' withdrawal from the SPM examination, particularly their motivation levels and engagement in school. One participant, in particular, detailed how his peers pressured him to skip classes, which eventually became a contributing factor to his withdrawal from school. This aligns with existing research showing that students associating with peers involved in delinquent activities are less likely to succeed academically and are more prone to losing focus on their studies, potentially leading to school dropout (Menegaa Paraman & Rosila Bee Mohd Hussain, 2022).

Lastly, the findings under this theme indicate that a negative relationship with teachers was a major factor contributing to one participant's decision to withdraw from the SPM examination. This highlights the detrimental impact of weak support systems within the school environment, particularly the teachers whose role is to help with academic experiences. Existing research supports this, showing that students' perceptions of their teachers' motivating styles, especially when viewed as unsupportive and less structured, are linked to a decline in autonomous motivation (Cohen et al., 2022). Moreover, factors such as having a poor relationship with teachers, not receiving positive feedback, and experiencing conflicts between school and family values can significantly impact students' likelihood of dropping out of school (Szabó, 2018). The current study highlights the crucial role that teacher-student relationships play in educational outcomes, illustrating that negative interactions with teachers can exacerbate students' disengagement and lead to withdrawal from SPM, which in turn creates a sense of alienation and erodes students' trust in their educators as sources of guidance and support.

### **Implication of study**

By illuminating the underlying psychological problems that drive students' withdrawal from SPM, the findings from this study can enlighten the Ministry of Education in the development of more effective intervention strategies to overcome the rising concern of no-shows. Not to mention, the education system can utilise these findings to develop targeted programmes addressing issues such as coping mechanisms for academic pressure, fostering positive peer relationships, and strengthening communication and support structures within families.

Ultimately, the results of this study can be utilised by schools, mental health agencies, and other relevant bodies to formulate tailored interventions aimed at combating the concerning rate of student withdrawal from the SPM examination. By acknowledging the psychological dimensions of this issue, we can create a more supportive educational environment that empowers students to reach their full potential.

### **Limitation of study**

First, recruiting participants from a vulnerable population like students who withdrew from school was challenging (Ellard-Gray et al., 2015). It was difficult to reach out to the target population due to them being "out of the radar" of the school system or a lack of readily available records. The small sample size, coupled with the fact that some participants withdrew early in their secondary education and may not have had extensive experience preparing for the SPM, limits the generalizability of the findings. The study may not fully represent the experiences of all senior secondary students facing SPM pressures, and the focus on Peninsular Malaysia, potentially excluded perspectives of students from East Malaysia.

Second, there are limitations in terms of data collection as well. The semi-structured interview method allowed for in-depth exploration of the participants' experiences of withdrawing from SPM, but the downside of it is that the reliance on participants' memories to recall past experiences can introduce inaccuracies. The passage of time can affect the participants' abilities to recall details precisely. Lastly, due to time constraints during the researcher's internship, the use of online interviews may have influenced the depth and quality of the data collected.

### **Conclusion and recommendations**

Overall, this study has provided an in-depth discussion of the study's findings on student withdrawal from high-stakes examinations such as SPM. The three themes that emerged from thematic analysis resonated with previous studies, reinforcing the validity of the current research and broadening the general understanding of the socio-psychological issues that contribute to students' withdrawal from school within the context of the Malaysian SPM examination.

Future research should offer more holistic insights into participant recruitment by recruiting more participants and broadening the scope to include rural areas and regions outside Peninsular Malaysia. This will facilitate a comparative analysis of how educational and psychological factors, alongside geographical location and socio-economic background, influence student withdrawal, and adopting a mixed-methods approach could enhance data richness and validity.

Furthermore, there is a critical need for research that delves deeper into the specific factors contributing to educational detachment within the Malaysian educational context. Investigating these underlying reasons comprehensively would provide a clearer understanding of how psychological stressors manifest among students facing high-stakes examinations like the SPM. Overall, these recommendations aim to create a more supportive educational environment and to empower a sense of purpose and motivation in students for their success in SPM.

### **Conflict of interest**

The researchers declare no conflict of interest in this study.

### **Author contribution**

Nursabrina Allisya Binti Syamsul Reza conceptualised the idea, and Aroyewun Temitope Folashade solidified it. The development of the method was done by Nursabrina Allisya Binti Syamsul Reza, Aroyewun Temitope Folashade, and Asma Perveen. Data was collected and translated by Nursabrina Allisya Binti Syamsul Reza but supervised by Aroyewun Temitope Folashade and Asma Perveen. The original draft was written by Nursabrina Allisya Binti Syamsul Reza and Aroyewun Temitope Folashade, and then reviewed and edited by Aroyewun Temitope Folashade and Asma Perveen.



## Data availability statement

The data that has been used is confidential and the authors do not have permission to share data.

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