

Mental Health of Japanese University Students Using Counseling: A Comparison by Sex and Grade Level

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Purpose

To establish an effective mental support system on campus, it is important to clarify the mental health characteristics of students visiting counseling centers. We analyzed mental health conditions by sex and grade level, using CCAPS scores at the initial visit. We aimed to clarify the characteristics of Japanese university students who require mental health counseling from specialists.

Methods

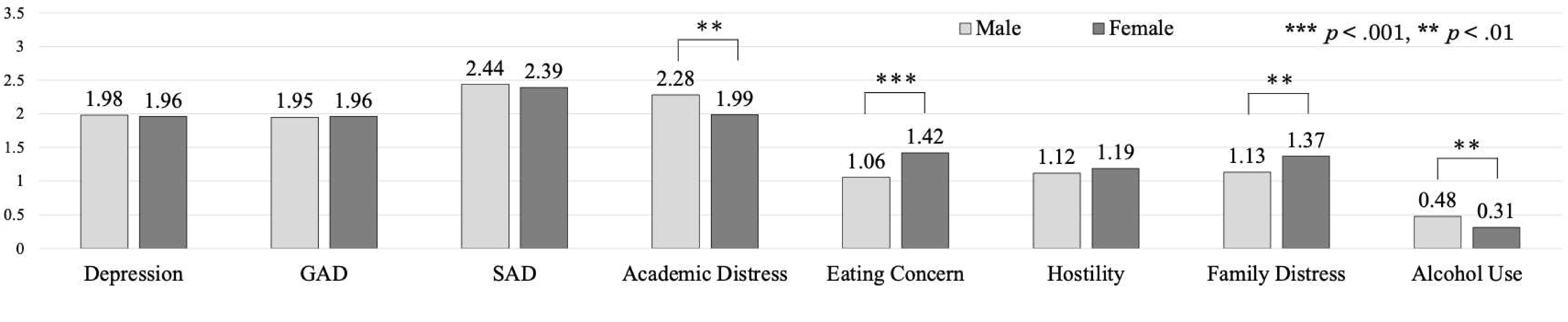
Participants and procedures Participants voluntarily visited the on-campus student counseling service at X University, a national general university in Japan; students who visited for the first time were included in this study. An online survey (Horita, 2022) was administered immediately before the first counseling appointment at the student counseling center's reception. A total of 414 undergraduate students participated in the study. The demographic breakdown shows 208 male and 206 female students, with a mean age of 21.49 (SD 3.17) years. Additionally, the students' grade-level breakdown was as follows: first year (n = 96), second year (n = 92), third year (n = 102), and fourth year (n = 132).

Measure CCAPS-Japanese (Horita et al., 2020) is utilized a 5-point Likert-type scale (ranging from 0 to 4) and assessed psychological symptoms of university students during the over two weeks. Higher scores reflected greater distress.

Ethics statement The research project was approved by the Research Ethical Committee of the Graduate School of Medicine, Gifu University, Japan (approval no. 2021-B114).

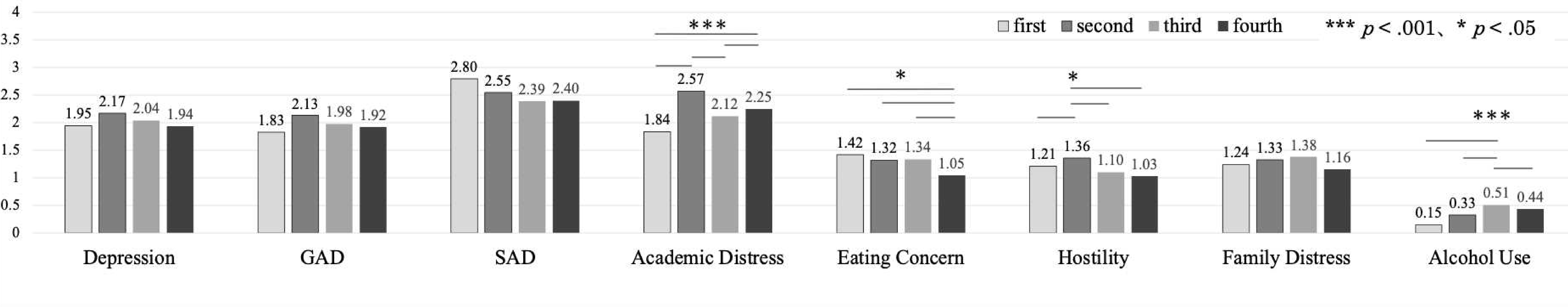
Results

Fig 1. Mean scores of CCAPS-Japanese factors in male and female students (independent samples *t*-test)



An independent samples *t*-test showed a statistically significant relationship between male and female students in Academic Distress ($t(532) = 3.14, p < .01$), Eating Concern ($t(517.46) = 4.74, p < .001$), Family Distress ($t(424.624) = 3.60, p < .001$), and Alcohol Use ($t(518.27) = 2.82, p < .01$).

Fig 2. Mean scores of CCAPS-Japanese factors in first- to fourth-year students (A one-way MANOVA)



A one-way MANOVA showed a statistically significant relationship in grade level in Academic Distress ($F(3,418) = 7.408, p < .001$), Eating Concern ($F(3,418) = 3.607, p < .05$), Hostility ($F(3,418) = 2.923, p < .05$), and Alcohol Use ($F(3,418) = 5.890, p < .001$).

Discussion

Sex Male often exhibit higher rates of academic stress and risky behaviors, such as alcohol consumption (Russell et al., 2017). These findings may stem from traditional gender roles emphasizing achievement and success in the academic and professional domains (Bowman et al., 2022). Female students' higher scores on eating concerns and family distress align with research highlighting their heightened vulnerability to eating disorders and greater sensitivity to family dynamics (Barakat et al., 2023) and may be influenced by traditional gender roles and expectations that often place more emotional and caregiving responsibilities on women within family dynamics (Repetti and Saxbe, 2019).

Grade level In Japanese universities, students encounter more specialized lectures in their second year. In their fourth year, they are required to write a graduation thesis, which increases academic stress. The elevated academic distress observed in this study may be due to the progress in academic requirements. Lower eating concerns among fourth-year students could suggest a potential adaptive mechanism developed over time (Levine and Piran, 2019).

Future direction Future research should focus on longitudinal studies to track the changes in psychological symptoms over time, and their relationship with various academic and personal milestones. Expanding the scope of future research to include diverse populations across various educational institutions and comparing the mental health and behavioral concerns of students from different cultural, socioeconomic, and geographical backgrounds could provide a more holistic understanding of these issues, and contribute to the development of universally applicable interventions.