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EMOTION REGULATION DIFFICULTIES AND SELF-  
CRITICISM AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS DURING COVID  
19 PANDEMIC IN INDONESIA

Eka Wahyuni<sup>1\*</sup>, Susi Fitri<sup>2</sup>, Wening Cahyawulan<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Guidance and Counseling Department, Faculty of Education, State University of Jakarta, Indonesia  
Email: ewahyuni@unj.ac.id

<sup>2</sup> Guidance and Counseling Department, Faculty of Education, State University of Jakarta, Indonesia  
Email: susi.fitri@unj.ac.id

<sup>3</sup> Guidance and Counseling Department, Faculty of Education, State University of Jakarta, Indonesia  
Email: wening@unj.ac.id

\* Corresponding Author

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**Abstract:**

This study examined the relationship between emotion regulation difficulties and self-criticism among college students during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study explores how particular aspects of emotion regulation difficulties correlate to the self-criticism dimension. Participants were 1049 college students from a university in the capital city (84 % female and 16% male). Students came from eight faculties (faculty of education, art and language, social science, technics, sport science, educational psychology, science and mathematics, and economy). The results show that the mean of emotion regulation was 57,23 and self-criticism was 48,72. Emotion regulation difficulties were found to be significantly associated with self-criticism ( $r=0,644;0,00$ ). There were no significant differences between males and females in emotion regulation and self-criticism. The result appeared similar in most of the subscales, except in one emotion regulation subscales (clarity) and two self-criticism subscales (inadequate self and reassured self). The implications of these findings for research and treatment are discussed.

**Keywords:**

Emotion Regulation Difficulties; Self-Criticism; College Student

## Introduction

The novel coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic since 2019, forces universities to implement online learning. Universities change their learning systems to prevent the spread of the virus. The policy on changing the lectures to virtual formats, postponing, and canceling several public lectures, students' events, extracurricular activities, internships, and graduation. This policy influence college students' personal, social, and professional milestones (Lederer, Hoban, Lipson, Zhou, & Eisenberg, 2021).

Learning from home is considered a solution to the pandemic, however, it might exacerbate college students' risk of personal, interpersonal distress and mental health concerns. Many undergraduate students face difficulties adapting to new routines and demands in their academic, personal and social sphere during learning from home policy (Copeland et al., 2021). Along with schoolwork, many college students are burdened by household chores and caregiving roles, such as helping their younger brother or sister to do their online learning tasks due to school closures. Furthermore, some students might challenge by sickness or loss of parents or other family members or friends.

As emerging adulthood, college students face many challenges in academic, social, and personal domains. Although emerging adults are characterized by optimism about the possibilities that lie ahead for them, they have strong a sense of instability about their present life and the future. They tend to sense negativity and instability due to many changes in their life domain (Murray & Arnett, 2018). More specifically during the outbreak of covid-19, there is a government restriction to meet and gather with others that could more affect college students' mental health than the virus itself (Magson et al., 2021). However, college students have been overlooked as a privileged, healthy, and resourced population. In fact, many college students suffer from mental health issues such as depression and anxiety (Lipson, Lattie, & Eisenberg, 2019).

Mental health is one of the concerning issues among college students compared to previous generations (Oswalt et al., 2020). A basic health survey in 2018 shows that depression starts to appear in adolescents (15-24 years old). As a member of the household, college students are at risk for mental health. A survey on mental health in Indonesia shows that depression prevalence in the household is 7% in villages and 6.4% in cities (Pusat Data dan Informasi, 2019). Several problems are related to mental health issues. A study found some factors that are associated with the high depression level of an adolescent during home learning, including being quarantined, the circle that dying from covid, having a bad relationship and little support from family, rarely or never seeking help from others, having too much spending time on a gadget, and feeling anxious about returning to school (Wang et al., 2020). Another study reported that there was a correlation between online learning and mental health among college students in West Java (Hifzul Muiz & Sumarni, 2020). Therefore, college students' risk of mental health due to developmental, family, personal-social, and academic challenges.

## Emotion Regulation Difficulties

Emotion regulation is one of the contributors to mental health among college students (Hu et al., 2014). Emotion regulation processes are linked to individual responses to a variety of day-to-day events such as home, school, and peers (Gross, 2015). Emotion regulation is referred to as the ability to monitor, evaluate, and modulate emotional reactions (Gross, 2015). Furthermore, emotion regulation is defined as the emotional processes which influenced

students and how they experienced and expressed their emotions (Gross, 2015). Emotion regulation involves four skills: awareness of emotional responses, clarity of emotional responses, acceptance of emotional responses, applying effective strategies to achieve the goal, ability to control impulsive behavior, and ability to engage in goal-directed behavior in response to situational demands (Gross, 2015).

Emotion regulation has an important effect on physical and mental health (Berking & Wupperman, 2012; Gross, 2015; Richardson, 2017). Many studies found that healthy emotion regulation leads to adaptive social behavior (Lopes, Salovey, Côté, Beers, & Petty, 2005) which contributes to social interaction (Lopes et al., 2005) and student retention (Parker, Hogan, Eastabrook, Oke, & Wood, 2006). Healthy emotion regulation. Emotion regulation is associated with physiological, attentional, and cognitive processes (Gross, 2015). The emotion regulation process affects physiological such as increased heart rate, attentional process such as observing and processing on the event, behavioral reasons such as reaching out or avoiding others, and cognitive processes such as imagining, thinking and perceiving, showing awareness (Gross, 2015).

On the other hand, difficulties with emotion regulation have been associated with a range of mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, stress, and anger (Chiu, Yee, Kwan, Cheung, & Hou, 2020; Martin & Dahlen, 2005), sexual aggression (Davis et al., 2020), self-criticism (Polack, Everaert, Uddenerg, Kober, & Joormann, 2021), and daily stress (Richardson, 2017). Many studies used emotion regulation difficulties as an important aspect to understand mental health phenomena such as depression and anxiety (Victor & Klonsky, 2016). The ability to regulate emotion is considered fundamental to healthy development, while difficulties in emotion regulation intensify psychopathology (Aldao, Nolen-Hoeksema, & Schweizer, 2010).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, college students face tremendous changes in their academic, social, and personal routines. They face more burden due to learning from home and social distancing policy. This extra burden could influence their ability to regulate emotion and lead to self-criticism.

### **Self-Criticism**

Difficulties in emotion regulation are related to self-criticism (Polack et al., 2021). Self-criticism is a self-evaluative and critical process where individuals judge themselves negatively especially in the face of a failure or setback (Paul Gilbert, Clarke, Hempel, Miles, & Irons, 2004; G. Shahar, 2015). According to cognitive models, self-criticism is comprised of various forms of maladaptive, negative thoughts, and schemas (Leahy, 2002; Whelton & Greenberg, 2005). Negative cognitions are a core component of self-criticism (Whelton & Greenberg, 2005). Therefore, when college students fail to acquire positive feedback from peers, parents, and lecturers, it tends to stimulate self-critical and self-criticism.

Self-criticism and emotion regulation interact over time (Polack et al., 2021). Self-criticism is related to mood changes and emotional reactions to pain (Fox, O'Sullivan, Wang, & Hooley, 2019). The dimension of self-criticism is reported to be related to negative affectivity (Krieger, Altenstein, Baettig, Doerig, & Holtforth, 2013). Self-criticism is considered a predictor of mental health issues such as depression and anxiety (Paul Gilbert et al., 2004).

Stress and difficulties in emotion regulation experienced by college students during the COVID-19 pandemic correlated with self-criticism. Self-criticism triggers the threat system by self-attack to motivate students to act. When students use threat systems as a source of motivation to act might develop mental health problems.

This research was intended to investigate the relationship between emotion regulation difficulties and self-criticism among college students during COVID 19 pandemic. The previous research on the relationship between emotion regulation and self-criticism was limited. Most studies examined the relationship between emotion regulation difficulties and mental health indicators such as depression, anxiety, self-compassion, and wellbeing.

### Methods

The purpose of the current study was to examine the relationship between emotion regulation difficulties and self-criticism during the covid 19 pandemic. The survey was conducted via the internet for 4 months. Invitations to participate in the survey were spread by social media such as Instagram and WhatsApp group. The participants provided written informed consent before filling out a set of questionnaires. The participants were 1094 students consisting of 165 males (16%) and 884 females (84%). The participant came from eight faculties, namely faculty of education (341 students), faculty of art and language (175 students), faculty of social science (117 students), faculty of technics (105 students), faculty of sports science (17 students), faculty of education psychology (29 students), faculty of science and mathematics (105 students) and faculty of economics (160 students). The age of the participants was ranging from 17 to above 25 years old.

**Table 1: Sociodemographic Characteristic Of The Sample**

		Amount	Percentage
<b>Gender</b>	Male	165	16%
	Female	884	84%
<b>Faculty</b>	Education	341	33%
	Art and language	175	17%
	Social science	117	11%
	Technics	105	10%
	Sport science	17	2%
	Psychology	29	3%
	Science and Mathematics	105	10%
	Economy	160	15%
<b>Age</b>	17	19	2%
	18	155	15%
	19	240	23%
	20	243	23%
	21	170	16%
	22	152	14%
	23	35	3%
	24	18	2%
	25 and above	17	2%

The measures used in this study are Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale (DERS) and Forms of Self Criticising and Self Reassuring Scale (FSCRS). *Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale (DERS)* is used to measure the emotion regulation difficulties. The measure has 36 items rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale. The scale includes six subscales, which are (a) lack of awareness of emotional responses (*awareness*); (b) lack of clarity of emotional responses (*clarity*); (c) non-acceptance of emotional responses (*non-acceptance*); (d) limited access to effective strategies (*strategies*); (e) difficulties in controlling impulsive behavior when experiencing negative affect (*impulse*); and (f) difficulties in engaging in goal-directed behavior when experiencing negative *goals*. The scale was adapted and validated with the internal consistency coefficient of the total scale was .92 (Arici-Ozcan, Cekici, & Arslan, 2019).

To measure self-criticism, the study used the FSCRS developed by Paul Gilbert et al. (2004). The scale has a 22-item measure. The participants fill the form by rating the positive and negative statements on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 0 = *not at all like me* to 4 = *extremely like me*. The scale measures self-reassurance, inadequate self, and hated self. Positive items measure self-reassurance which focuses on the ability to support themselves when things go wrong. While negative items measure two types of self-criticism; an inadequate self which is measured on a sense of personal inadequacy and a hated self which reflects self-critical thoughts and feelings. The Cronbach's alphas for inadequate self was 0.90, 0.86 for hated self, and 0.86 for reassured self (Paul Gilbert et al., 2004).

The data analysis used SPSS-16. The study used a Pearson product-moment to analyze the correlation between variables and analysis of covariance (ANOVA) to analyze differences of variables and its subscales between male and female students.

## Results

The study aimed to explore the relationship between emotion regulation difficulties and self-criticism among college students during the covid 19 pandemic. Data were analyzed by SPSS-16 to examine the relationships between emotion regulation difficulties and self-criticism. The results show that the mean of emotion regulation difficulties was 57,23 and self-criticism was 48,72. The mean of emotion regulation difficulties subscales was ranged from 8,35 to 10,95 and the self-criticism subscale was ranged from 5.34 to 43.38 as presented in table 2.

**Table 2: The Mean and Standard Deviation of Emotion Regulation Difficulties and Self-Criticism**

	Mean	SD
Emotion Regulation Difficulties	57,23	14,236
Strategies	8,88	3,278
Non-acceptance	8,78	3,440
Impulse	8,35	3,687
Goals	10,86	3,264
Awareness	10,95	2,629
Clarity	9,42	3,551
Self-Criticism	48,72	10,968
Inadequate self	22,64	7,613
Reassured self	43,38	8,341
Hated self	5,34	5,340



The result shows that there was a positive significant correlation between emotion regulation difficulties and self-criticism ( $r=0,644;0,00$ ) among college students. There was a positive significant correlation between most emotion regulation difficulties subscales and self-criticism subscales. Two subscales were not significantly related to other subscales, namely non-acceptance, and awareness as well as awareness and inadequate self. A positive significant association was observed between emotion regulation difficulties and self-criticism, confirming our expectation that individuals with greater emotion regulation difficulties would experience higher self-criticism.

The positive association between emotion regulation difficulties and self-criticism was consistent with the theory. The relationship between emotion regulation difficulties and self-criticism has a similar sense to the study conducted by Polack et al. (2021) which reported that self-criticism was positively associated with emotion-related problems such as rumination. They also observed that self-criticism and emotion regulation have a complex pathway and interact over time (Gadassi Polack, Everaert, Uddenberg, Kober, & Joormann, 2021). The previous study found that self-criticism positively correlated with mood changes when an individual experienced pain (Fox et al., 2019). Self-criticism and emotion regulation resonated which predicts non-suicidal self-injury among eating disorder respondents (Perkins, Ortiz, & Smith, 2020).

During emerging adulthood, college students still experience emotional instability caused by hormonal influences (Somerville, Jones, & Casey, 2010; Zimmermann & Iwanski, 2014). However, future expectations and experiences in social and personal adaptation increase the emotional stability of emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2014). The use of emotion regulation depends on the situation and how the individual appraisal the situation (Gross, 2001). Therefore, college students are expected to have better emotion regulation. Successful emotion regulation is affected by the level of criticism. The higher the self-criticism level, the heightened difficulties in emotion regulation which increased the vulnerability of college students to mental health problems (Berking & Wupperman, 2012; Hu et al., 2014).

Emotion regulation contains the conscious and nonconscious strategies in increasing or decreasing and maintaining emotional responses (Gross, 2015). Regarding that, self-criticism is closely related to the evaluative process consciously or non-consciously. The interaction between self-criticism and emotion regulation difficulties occurred unconsciously in their everyday life. College students experience more burden due to learning from home policy, anxiety about the virus, loss of friends and family members. Inability to regulate emotion due to uncomforted events might lead to heighten self-criticism.

The relationship between most emotion regulation difficulties and self-criticism subscale was positively significant, except for the relationship between non-acceptance and awareness as well as between awareness and inadequate self. College students who had difficulties in emotion regulation tend to use maladaptive strategies such as self-criticism. The result confirmed by Aldao and Nolen-Hoeksema (2012) findings that individuals who have a lack of emotion regulation strategy tend to use maladaptive strategy and its effect is stronger for self-criticism. Many disturbances experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic could intensify self-criticism which leads to other mental health issues.

There was an unexpected negative relationship between non-acceptance and clarity, awareness and clarity, awareness and hated self. It is possible that the relationship between clarity and non-acceptance and awareness might be influenced by other moderating variables or differences in a situation that elicits the emotion as well as attention and appraisal to the situation (Naragon-Gainey, McMahon, & Chacko, 2017).

In the subscales analysis, our finding showed that non-acceptance does not have a significant relationship to awareness. This means that students who cannot accept their emotional feeling and expression could not be concluded that they tend to ignore their emotions. There might be another variable that contributed to the acceptance and awareness of emotion. The result is contradicted with a study conducted by Hu et al. (2014) which discovered that a person who has denial to negative emotions tends unaware of emotional responses.

Another insignificant relationship was found in the emotion regulation difficulties subscale, non-acceptance and awareness, and inadequate self. Ignorance of realizing and expressing emotion does not relate directly to the inadequate self. Inadequate self could be related to students' cognition and perception of their ability and achievement, so that awareness of emotion does not have a correlation with it.

**Table 3: Correlation Between Emotion Regulation Difficulties And Self-Criticism And Its Subscales**

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Emotion Regulation Difficulties	-	.644** ,000	.877** ,000	.762** ,000	.821** ,000	.792** ,000	.258** ,000	.690** ,000	.710** ,000	.470** ,000	.590** ,000
2. Self-Criticism		-	.577** ,000	.513** ,000	.483** ,000	.487** ,000	.263** ,000	.410** ,000	.863** ,000	.882** ,000	.676** ,000
3. Strategies			-	.616** ,000	.709** ,000	.689** ,000	.119** ,000	.537** ,000	.661** ,000	.390** ,000	.578** ,000
4. Non-acceptance				-	.524** ,000	.483** ,000	-.001 ,970	.531** ,000	.560** ,000	.333** ,000	.532** ,000
5. Impulse					-	.597** ,000	.143** ,000	.435** ,000	.531** ,000	.317** ,000	.496** ,000
6. Goals						-	.153** ,000	.419** ,000	.577** ,000	.391** ,000	.390** ,000
7. Awareness							-	-.107** ,001	.114** ,037	.388** ,000	-.065** ,000
8. Clarity								-	.526** ,000	.225** ,000	.491** ,000
9. Inadequate self									-	.708** ,000	.667** ,000
10. Reassured self										-	.249** ,000
11. Hated self											-

Table 3 presents the analysis of differences in emotion regulation difficulties and self-criticism between male and female students. It was found that there were no significant differences between males and females in emotion regulation and self-criticism. The result appeared similar in most subscales. However, there were differences between females and males in one emotion regulation subscales (clarity) and two self-criticism subscales (inadequate self and reassured self). The findings in this study are inconsistent with a past study conducted by Luyten et al. (2007) which revealed significant differences between males and females in self-criticism but not in its dimensions. The result is also contradicted with the previous study that assumed gender incongruence that women have high levels of self-criticism than men (Blatt, 2004).

In the context of the COVID 19 pandemic situation which forces college students to study from home, male and female students might have extra burdens as students, daughters or sons, and members of the community. The extra burden might be resulted in stress, due to emotion regulation difficulties and self-criticism. Stress arises when individuals see the tasks exciding their ability to be completed (Peciuliene, Perminas, Gustainiene, & Valiune, 2015). According to Hochwalder and Saied (2018), female students experienced the hassles more intensively than male student hassle. Women have to spend more time on household chores during weekdays and more time on weekends (Cosp & Roman, 2018). Therefore, female students were considered to have a higher burden which contributed to higher emotion regulation difficulties and self-criticism. However, differences in daily hassle not resulted in differences in emotion regulation difficulties and self-criticism during the COVID-19 pandemics. It could be concluded the COVID-19 pandemics is not influence differences in emotion regulation difficulties and self-criticism between female and male students. Emotion regulation difficulties and self-criticism might be contributed by the effect of pandemic such as anxiety, loneliness, grieving, and losing family due to pandemics.

**Table 3**  
**Gender Differences Between Variables and Its Sub-Scale**

	<i>f</i>	<i>sig</i>
Emotion Regulation Difficulties	2,415	,120
Strategies	1,982	,159
Non-acceptance	,035	,852
Impulse	1,634	,201
Goals	,584	,445
Awareness	,134	,715
Clarity	7,929	,005
Self-Criticism	3,625	,057
Inadequate self	6,883	,009
Reassured self	6,559	,011
Hated self	,007	,933

Emotion regulation difficulties and self-criticism experienced by college students could induce mental health issues such as distress (Prentice, Rees, & Finlay-Jones, 2021), substance abuse (Dvorak et al., 2014), depression (Crowell et al., 2014), conduct problems (Cappadocia,



Desrocher, Pepler, & Schroeder, 2009), anxiety (Folk, Zeman, Poon, & Dallaire, 2014), post-traumatic stress (Weiss, Contractor, Forkus, Goncharenko, & Raudales, 2020).

Several studies explore various interventions to self-criticism such as emotion regulation skills (Aldao et al., 2010; Polack et al., 2021), compassion-focused therapy (P. Gilbert, 2010),, and emotion-focused therapy (B. Shahar et al., 2012). Each intervention has advantages and limitations. However, compassion-focused therapy seems feasible to be implemented in college students due to its flexibility and cognition-related therapy.

There are several limitations to our study. First, data for this study was collected online mode, therefore lack of randomization result in a low level of confidence and margin of error. The second is this study relied on self-report data only which could cause bias of data.

### Conclusion

Emotion regulation difficulties and self-criticism were revealed to be significantly correlated among the college population. Although female students are considered to have higher emotion regulation difficulties and self-criticism, gender is not contributed to differentiate the emotion regulation difficulties and self-criticism among college students during the COVID-19 pandemic. It was recommended that future studies could further analyze the impact of emotion regulation and self-criticism from a positive point of view such as self-compassion, emotional wellbeing, and sense of coherence. It was recommended that potential intervention to address emotion regulation difficulties and self-criticism could be explored by a systematic review, meta-analysis, and randomized control trial to find an effective treatment to emotion regulation difficulties and self-criticism.

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