



Psychological Distress Across Grade Levels in Cadet-Based Boarding Senior High School Students: A Comparative Study of Depression, Anxiety, and Stress

Afifah Army Age^{*1}, Diniy Hidayatur Rahman², Zamroni³

^{1,2,3} Universitas Negeri Malang, Malang, Indonesia

Abstract. This study evaluated differences in depression, anxiety, and stress across grade levels among students in a cadet-based boarding senior high school. The study employed a quantitative approach with a comparative design, involving 423 students from grades X, XI, and XII, with an equal distribution of respondents across each grade. Data were collected using the 42-item Depression Anxiety Stress Scales (DASS-42) to measure the three psychological dimensions. Data analysis was conducted using descriptive statistics and group comparison tests, specifically applying analysis of variance (ANOVA) and Welch tests based on data distribution characteristics, followed by the Games-Howell post hoc test for variables demonstrating significant variations. The findings revealed that grade-level differences emerged exclusively for depression. Grade XI students reported higher mean depression scores ($M = 6.45$, $SD = 7.73$) than grade X students ($M = 4.35$, $SD = 5.62$), as indicated by Welch's $F(2, 275.7) = 3.62$, $p = .028$, with the Games-Howell test confirming a significant difference between grade X and grade XI ($p = .027$). Anxiety and stress did not differ significantly across grade levels. Across all grades, group mean scores for the three dimensions remained within the normal-to-mild ranges of the DASS-42 norms. This study concludes that student mental health dimensions in a cadet-based boarding school environment do not develop uniformly across grade levels. Consequently, guidance and counseling services must strengthen promotive and preventive initiatives that are highly responsive to students' specific developmental phases, particularly focusing on monitoring depressive symptoms among more vulnerable student groups.

Keywords: Anxiety; boarding school students; cadet-based school depression; stress

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***Correspondence Author:** Afifah Army Age, afifah.army.2501118@students.um.ac.id, Malang, Indonesia



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Introduction

Adolescent mental health has become an increasingly important issue in educational psychology because adolescence is marked by biological, cognitive, social, and academic changes that occur simultaneously (Karyati et al., 2025). During this phase, depression, anxiety, and stress not only affect psychological well-being but also impact students' ability to concentrate on learning, regulate emotions, maintain social relationships, and achieve academically. Lu et al. (2024), through a global meta-analysis, showed that approximately one in five children and adolescents experiences depression or depressive symptoms, with a prevalence trend that has increased over time. In the Indonesian context, Pham et al. (2024) reported that among adolescents aged 16–18 who were still in school, the prevalence of psychological disorders reached 24.3% and the prevalence of depression was 12.6%. These findings affirm that school cannot be understood merely as an academic space, but also as a developmental context that significantly shapes adolescent mental health. Furthermore, this developmental challenge can become a *double burden* when it directly confronts the formal educational institution, namely when adolescents must simultaneously complete their biopsychosocial developmental tasks while meeting academic demands, institutional rules, and structured social relationships (Nawangarsi, 2025). The convergence of developmental vulnerability and institutional demands is what allows school to function as both a risk context and a protective context for adolescent mental health.

This vulnerability becomes more complex when adolescents live within a boarding school system. Unlike non-boarding students, boarding students are engaged in learning, care, social interaction, and self-adjustment within a relatively integrated living space for nearly twenty-four hours a day. Xing et al., (2021) showed that the experience of living in a dormitory is associated with symptoms of depression and anxiety, with separation from parents acting as the main mediator in this relationship. In addition, Li et al. (2023) found that among boarding students, peer support is a crucial factor for emotional well-being, even more prominent than parental support in predicting future well-being. A recent finding by Liu et al. (2025) also shows that boarding secondary school students who experience bullying tend to exhibit higher levels of mental health problems, while a sense of belonging to the school and resilience function as protective mediators. Thus, the boarding school environment can act as both a protective factor and a risk factor, depending on the quality of relationships, the social climate, and the support available within it.

At the senior high school level, this vulnerability is generally aggravated by demands for academic achievement, competition among peers, and an increasing focus on the future. Steare et al. (2023), in a systematic review of 52 studies, affirmed that academic pressure has a positive relationship with various mental health problems among adolescents. In line with this, Becker and Börnert-Ringleb (2025) showed that students' stress and anxiety are influenced not only by individual factors but also by class climate, particularly competition and academic achievement at the grade level. This implies that students' psychological stress does not arise out of nowhere, but rather develops within a school ecosystem that emphasizes attainment and achievement. More specifically, Dong et al. (2025) reported a prevalence of depressive symptoms of 24.4%, anxiety of 41.4%, and stress of 15.6% among senior high school students. That study also showed that senior high school students exhibited higher symptom levels than junior high school students, and that boarding students faced higher risk than students who commute or do not board. These findings suggest that the combination of academic demands and a boarding lifestyle constitutes a significant

risk configuration that warrants further research. What has not been widely examined is how this achievement-oriented ecosystem interacts with grade-level position, given that academic demands, achievement expectations, and competitive pressure are not always distributed evenly across grade levels but may peak at particular grade phases, thereby potentially producing a differentiation of psychological distress between grade levels, rather than merely a difference between boarding and non-boarding students in general.

In the Indonesian context, similar trends have also been observed in boarding school environments. Research by Asri (2024) found that 62.4% of boarding school students exhibited factors associated with depression, and that level of education was one of the variables significantly related to these symptoms. Meanwhile, Irawan et al. (2025) reported that 30.64% of boarding students in East Java experienced stress during the early post-pandemic period, with significantly associated factors including sex, length of stay in the dormitory, dissatisfaction with allowance, poor communication with friends, and a lack of social activity with peers. Both findings indicate that within Indonesian boarding school environments, the educational phase and the dynamics of social adaptation can influence students' psychological well-being. The findings of Irawan et al. (2025) were obtained during the early post-pandemic period, whereas the present study was conducted when school activities had returned to normal in the endemic period. Therefore, that study is used as a contextual comparison rather than as a representation of conditions fully equivalent to the present study.

One specific form of boarding school in Indonesia is the cadet-based school (cadet-based school). Operationally, the cadet school has features that distinguish it from the general boarding school and the *pesantren* (Islamic boarding school), namely the application of semi-military-style discipline, a daily schedule tightly structured from waking until evening rest, a seniority and command system, routine physical and mental training, and dormitory rules that emphasize obedience, uniformity, and character formation (Solong & Busa, 2020). This system can serve as a protective factor through routine, structure, and a sense of togetherness, while also serving as a risk factor through disciplinary pressure, limited privacy, and a high adaptation burden. For consistency, the term "*ketarunaan*" (the cadet system) is used as the primary term in this article. In the context of a boarding school with a semi-military disciplinary framework, this dynamic is likely to be felt even more strongly because students not only face academic demands and adjustment to communal life, but are also situated within a system that emphasizes strict discipline, a tightly structured daily schedule, obedience to rules, and high achievement expectations (Cruz, 2025).

Theoretically, the command and seniority system within the cadet model does not operate uniformly, but rather positions each grade level within a different psychosocial role and burden. The emphasis on discipline, hierarchy, and separation from family at the start of the study period has been observed in the context of boarding schools and boarding schools in Indonesia, which underscores the importance of supportive school-environment structures for student well-being (Hidayah et al., 2021; Siregar & Syarqawi, 2023). Grade X students occupy the lowest junior position and therefore face the most intense adaptation burden with respect to discipline, hierarchy, and separation from family, which is more a matter of adjustment stress (adjustment stress) at the start of the study period. Grade XI students occupy an intermediate or transitional position: they no longer receive the leniency of newcomers, but do not yet hold full authority as seniors, while beginning to bear the accumulating academic demands and rising achievement expectations

without the clear graduation goal that grade XII students have. Conversely, grade XII students occupy the top senior position, which relatively affords autonomy, status, mastery of routines, and a goal orientation toward graduation that can serve to stabilize their psychological condition. It is this tiered role configuration that theoretically allows psychological distress, particularly depression, to be distributed unevenly, instead potentially peaking at the intermediate phase. This theoretical argument provides the basis for formulating the hypothesis that there are differences in the levels of depression, anxiety, and stress between grade levels among students in a cadet-based boarding senior high school.

Although various studies have demonstrated a high vulnerability to mental health problems among school-aged adolescents and boarding school students, a mapping of the literature reveals gaps that need to be addressed. Prior studies have tended to focus on the general prevalence of adolescent mental health problems, comparisons between boarding and non-boarding students (Dong et al., 2025; Xing et al., 2021), the context of the *pesantren* or religious boarding institutions (Asri, 2024; Irawan et al., 2025), or grade comparisons at the macro level such as junior versus senior high school. Studies that specifically compare psychological distress between grade levels within a single senior high school level remain limited, and studies in the context of a cadet-based boarding senior high school are even rarer. Based on this mapping, there are two gaps. First, a scientific gap, namely the scarcity of DASS studies across grade levels in cadet-based boarding schools. Second, a practical gap, namely that guidance and counseling teachers do not yet have a data basis regarding which grade level most requires monitoring.

Method

Research Design

This study employed a quantitative approach with a comparative *cross-sectional* design. This design was chosen because data were collected once across three grade levels to compare the levels of depression, anxiety, and stress between groups at a single point in time, without tracing changes longitudinally.

Research Setting

The study was conducted at a single cadet-based boarding senior high school. This school applies semi-military-based discipline, a structured daily schedule, routine physical and mental training, and dormitory rules that emphasize obedience and uniformity. All students live in the dormitory throughout their period of study. The school is located in the city of Malang, East Java, and is a public school with a competitive selection system. Each cohort consists of students from various regions of Indonesia with diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, although generally from families with relatively strong educational support. This contextual information is presented to provide a picture of the research environment while helping readers assess the limits of transferability (*transferability*) of the study findings. The characteristics of the cadet environment and boarding life are considered relevant because they can function as both risk and protective factors for students' mental health.

Population, Sample, and Criteria

The population of this study comprised all grade X, XI, and XII students who met the criteria to be included as respondents. Based on these criteria, the number of participants in this study was 423 students, consisting of 141 grade X students, 141 grade XI students, and 141 grade XII students. The sampling technique used was total sampling (saturated sampling), in which all students across the three grade levels who met the inclusion criteria were involved as respondents without any randomization procedure. Participation criteria included being an active student in grade X, XI, or XII, living in the dormitory, and being willing to complete the questionnaire scale. Data were collected using a Google Form distributed through whole-class (classical) activities. At the beginning of the instrument, respondents were first given an explanation of the purpose of completing the questionnaire scale, the guarantee of data confidentiality, and the right to participate voluntarily. Data collection was carried out in January 2026, in a single data-collection period during the even semester of the 2025/2026 academic year.

Table 1. Participant Distribution

Characteristic	Grade X	Grade XI	Grade XII	Total
Number (n)	141	141	141	423

Instrument

The instrument used in this study was the *Depression Anxiety Stress Scales* 42-item version (DASS-42), developed by Lovibond and Lovibond and adapted into Indonesian (Tiara Pertiwi et al., 2021). This instrument consists of 42 statements divided into three subscales, namely depression, anxiety, and stress, with each subscale comprising 14 items. The blueprint of the DASS-42 questionnaire is presented below.

Table 2. Blueprint of the DASS-42 Questionnaire

Variable	Number of Items	Item Numbers in the Questionnaire
Depression	14	3, 6, 9, 12, 14, 16, 19, 21, 24, 27, 30, 33, 36, 39
Anxiety	14	2, 5, 8, 11, 13, 17, 20, 23, 26, 29, 32, 35, 38, 41
Stress	14	1, 4, 7, 10, 15, 18, 22, 25, 28, 31, 34, 37, 40, 42

Each item is answered using a four-point Likert scale, with scores ranging from 0 to 3, such that higher scores indicate higher levels of depression, anxiety, and stress. An overview of the DASS-42 measurement scores is shown in Table 2 below.

Table 3. DASS-42 Scoring

Score	Description
0	Did not apply to me at all, or never
1	Applied to me to some degree, or some of the time
2	Applied to me to a considerable degree, or a good part of the time
3	Applied to me very much, or most of the time

The scores on each subscale were then summed and interpreted based on the DASS-42 categorization norms to obtain a picture of the severity level of respondents' psychological conditions. The selection of this instrument was based on its ability to simultaneously measure three dimensions of psychological distress relevant to the developmental context of adolescents in

a boarding school environment. The DASS-42 questionnaire scoring categories can be seen in Table 3.

Table 4. DASS-42 Questionnaire Categories

DASS-42 Questionnaire Category	Stress	Anxiety	Depression
Normal	0 – 14	0 – 7	0 – 9
Mild	15 – 18	8 – 9	10 – 13
Moderate	19 – 25	10 – 14	14 – 20
Severe	26 – 33	15 – 19	21 – 27
Extremely Severe	34+	20+	28+

Source: Lovibond, S.H. & Lovibond, P.F. (1995, in healthfocuspsychology.com.au) (Marsidi, 2021)

The instrument used in this study was the *Depression Anxiety Stress Scale* (DASS-42), a standardized instrument that has been widely used to measure depression, anxiety, and stress. The validity and reliability of the Indonesian version of the DASS-42 have been established in a number of previous adaptation studies, which have consistently reported a three-factor structure and high internal-consistency coefficients. Nevertheless, to ensure the instrument's suitability for the context and characteristics of this study's respondents, the researchers still calculated internal-consistency reliability based on data obtained from 423 respondents. The analysis showed an adequate reliability coefficient, with a total score of [$\alpha = 0.732$]. Subsequently, the data that had been collected then went through stages of checking the completeness of responses, coding the responses, and computing the score for each subscale in accordance with the DASS-42 guidelines. After that, the data were grouped by grade level for the purposes of comparative analysis. Data analysis was conducted in two stages. First, descriptive statistical analysis was used to describe the tendency of depression, anxiety, and stress scores in each grade group. Second, inferential statistical analysis was conducted to test differences between groups. Before hypothesis testing, a prerequisite test in the form of a homogeneity test was first performed. Because the homogeneity test showed that the variances of the depression and stress scores were not homogeneous, the final inferential decision for these two variables was based on the Welch test. As for the anxiety variable, because the homogeneity assumption was met, the test of differences was conducted using a One-Way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) (Hidayat, 2012). The entire analysis process was carried out with the help of statistical software at a significance level of 0.05.

Results

This study involved 423 students who were evenly divided into three grade levels, namely 141 grade X students, 141 grade XI students, and 141 grade XII students. The analyzed data comprised the total scores for depression, anxiety, and stress obtained from the *Depression Anxiety Stress Scales* (DASS-42) instrument. The presentation of results begins with descriptive statistics to describe the score tendencies at each grade level, followed by a test of variance homogeneity and a test of differences between groups according to the characteristics of the data.

Table 5. Descriptive statistics of depression, anxiety, and stress scores by grade level

Variable	Grade	N	M	SD	Min	Max
Depression	X	141	4.35	5.62	.00	32.00
	XI	141	6.45	7.73	.00	39.00
	XII	141	5.50	5.97	.00	31.00

Variable	Grade	N	M	SD	Min	Max
Anxiety	X	141	7.82	6.53	.00	35.00
	XI	141	7.31	6.88	.00	32.00
	XII	141	6.60	6.38	.00	38.00
Stress	X	141	9.40	7.23	.00	26.00
	XI	141	10.13	9.42	.00	38.00
	XII	141	9.53	7.78	.00	38.00

Based on Table 5, the highest mean depression score was found among grade XI students (M = 6.45; SD = 7.73), followed by grade XII (M = 5.50; SD = 5.97) and grade X (M = 4.35; SD = 5.62). For the anxiety variable, the highest mean was found in grade X (M = 7.82; SD = 6.53), then grade XI (M = 7.31; SD = 6.88), and grade XII (M = 6.60; SD = 6.38). As for the stress variable, the highest mean was found in grade XI (M = 10.13; SD = 9.42), followed by grade XII (M = 9.53; SD = 7.78) and grade X (M = 9.40; SD = 7.23). When these means are interpreted based on the DASS-42 categorization norms in Table 4, it appears that the mean scores for all grade groups fall within a relatively low range. The mean depression scores across the three grade levels (4.35–6.45) fall within the Normal category (0–9), as do the mean stress scores (9.40–10.13), which remain within the Normal category (0–14). Meanwhile, the mean anxiety scores (6.60–7.82) lie at the boundary between the Normal (0–7) and Mild (8–9) categories. Thus, the differences identified between grade levels occurred within a range of scores that is generally not yet clinical, so that these findings do not depict widespread clinical depression, but rather a shift in symptom severity within the subclinical-to-mild range.

Before the test of differences was conducted, a variance homogeneity test was first performed. Given that the sample size per group was large and balanced (n = 141), parametric tests were regarded as *robust*; for variables whose variances were not homogeneous, the Welch test was used as the basis for the decision. The results of these tests are presented in the following table.

Table 6. Variance Homogeneity Test (Levene)

Variable	Levene Statistic	df	p
Depression	6.746	2; 420	0.001
Anxiety	0.352	2; 420	0.704
Stress	5.314	2; 420	0.005

The variance homogeneity test showed that the variance of the depression scores was not homogeneous (Levene = 6.746; p = 0.001) and the variance of the stress scores was also not homogeneous (Levene = 5.314; p = 0.005). Conversely, the variance of the anxiety scores was homogeneous (Levene = 0.352; p = 0.704). Based on these results, the test of differences for the depression and stress variables was conducted using the Welch test, whereas for the anxiety variable a One-Way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was used.

Based on these results, the test of differences in depression and stress scores was conducted using the *Welch test*, whereas the test of differences in anxiety scores was conducted using a *One-Way Analysis of Variance* (ANOVA).

Table 7. Results of the test of differences in depression, anxiety, and stress scores by grade level

Variable	Test (decision)	F	df	p	Effect size
Depression	Welch	3.62	2; 275.7	0.028	$\omega^2 = 0.012$
Anxiety	ANOVA	1.22	2; 420	0.298	$\eta^2 = 0.006$
Stress	Welch	0.28	2; 277.0	0.756	$\eta^2 = 0.001$

The inferential test results showed that only the depression variable had a statistically significant difference in means between groups. In accordance with the homogeneity test results, the final inferential decision for the depression and stress variables was based on the Welch test, whereas the anxiety variable was analyzed using a One-Way ANOVA. For the depression variable, the Welch test showed a significant difference, $F(2; 275.7) = 3.62$, $p = 0.028$, with a small effect size ($\omega^2 = 0.012$). Conversely, the anxiety variable did not show a significant difference, $F(2; 420) = 1.22$, $p = 0.298$, $\eta^2 = 0.006$, as was the case for the stress variable, $F(2; 277.0) = 0.28$, $p = 0.756$, $\eta^2 = 0.001$. Thus, among the three dimensions of psychological distress examined, the difference between grade levels was only proven significant for the depression variable, while for the anxiety and stress variables no meaningful differences between grades were found based on the Welch test.

Because the results of the *Welch test* for the depression variable showed significance, the analysis was continued with the *post hoc Games-Howell*.

Table 8. Results of the Games-Howell Post Hoc Test

Variable	Grade Comparison	Mean Difference	p-value	Description
Depression	X – XI	-2.092	0.027	Significant
	XI – XII	-1.149	0.221	Not Significant
	XI - XII	0.943	0.486	Not Significant
Anxiety	X – XI	0.504	0.804	Not Significant
	XI – XII	1.220	0.254	Not Significant
	XI - XII	0.716	0.637	Not Significant
Stress	X – XI	-0.723	0.750	Not Significant
	XI – XII	-0.128	0.989	Not Significant
	XI - XII	0.596	0.831	Not Significant

The post hoc test showed that there was a significant difference between grade X and grade XI students, with a mean difference = -2.092 and $p = 0.027$. The negative sign on the mean difference value indicates that the mean depression score of grade X students was lower than that of grade XI students. Meanwhile, the differences between grade X and grade XII (mean difference = -1.149; $p = 0.221$) and between grade XI and grade XII (mean difference = 0.943; $p = 0.486$) were not statistically significant. Thus, a difference in depression between grades was found only between grade X and grade XI students.

For the anxiety variable, all between-grade comparisons in the Games-Howell test were not significant, namely between grade X and grade XI (mean difference = 0.504; $p = 0.804$), between grade X and grade XII (mean difference = 1.220; $p = 0.254$), and between grade XI and grade XII (mean difference = 0.716; $p = 0.637$). These results confirm that there were no meaningful differences in anxiety scores between grade X, XI, and XII students.

For the stress variable, all comparison pairs were also not significant, namely between grade X and grade XI (mean difference = -0.723; $p = 0.750$), between grade X and grade XII (mean difference = -0.128; $p = 0.989$), and between grade XI and grade XII (mean difference = 0.596; $p = 0.831$).

= 0.831). Thus, there were no significant differences in stress scores between grade X, XI, and XII students.

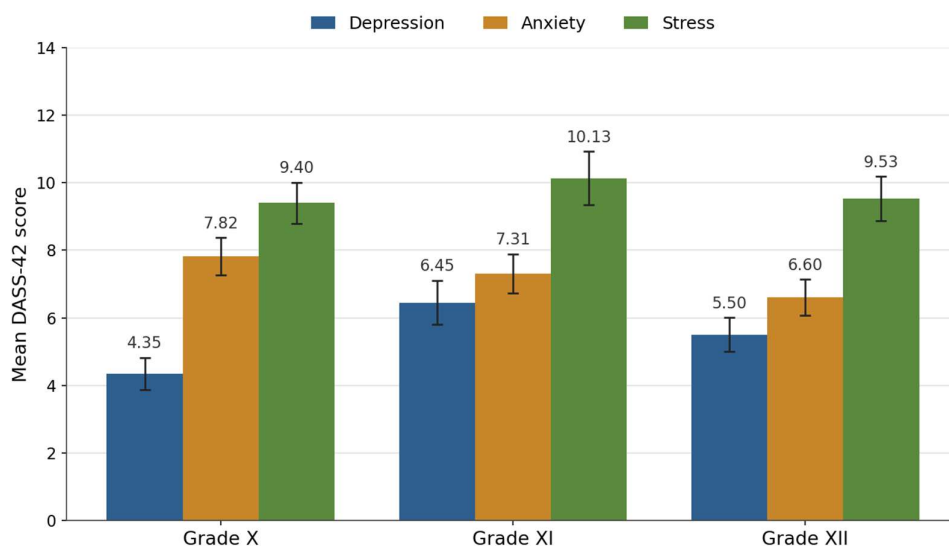


Figure 1. Patterns of Mean DASS-42 scores Across Grade Levels (error bars = standard error)

Figure 1 shows that the pattern of differences between grade levels is most apparent in the depression dimension, whereas anxiety and stress are relatively even across all grade levels.

Discussion

Main Research Findings

The main question arising from these findings is not merely that grade level is related to students' psychological condition, but why the differences between grade levels emerge only in the depression dimension and not in anxiety or stress. This selective pattern is the core of the discussion, because if the pressures of the cadet-based boarding environment operated uniformly across all aspects of psychological condition, the differences between grade levels should also appear in the anxiety and stress dimensions. The fact that only depression differed significantly, with grade XI students as the group with the highest mean, suggests that the operating mechanism is specific to the affective-cognitive dimension of depression, and not to the physiological reactivity that characterizes anxiety or the general tension that characterizes stress. Therefore, the following discussion is directed toward tracing the factors that may explain the relatively higher vulnerability to depression at the intermediate grade level, namely grade XI. This finding is in line with the systematic review by Steare et al. (2023), which affirms that academic pressure is consistently related to various adolescent mental health problems. In line with this, Becker & Börnert-Ringleb (2025) showed that students' experiences of stress and anxiety are also influenced by the level of competitiveness and academic achievement within that grade. In the context of this study, these findings provide an interpretive basis suggesting that the grade XI phase may be a period in which the demands for academic performance, achievement expectations, and pressure to maintain one's position within the school system begin to increase, making it easier for these factors to manifest as depressive symptoms.

Depression

The higher depression scores in grade XI can also be interpreted in relation to the boarding school context. In a boarding school, the learning experience does not end in the classroom but continues in communal life in the dormitory, which is marked by intense interaction, strict rules, and limited access to personal psychological recovery. Xing et al. (2021) showed that the experience of living in a boarding school is associated with symptoms of depression and anxiety, with separation from parents acting as the main mediator in this relationship. On the other hand, Li et al. (2023) found that, for boarding students, peer support is a highly significant factor for emotional well-being, even more prominent than parental support in predicting subsequent well-being. The findings of Liu et al. (2025) also show that boarding senior high school students who experience a negative school environment, such as bullying, tend to exhibit higher levels of mental health problems, while a sense of belonging to the school and resilience are crucial. Considering these findings, the higher level of depression observed in grade XI in this study can be understood as a potential imbalance between increasing academic demands and the lack of optimal emotional-support resources available to students at that stage. This is also shown in the study conducted by Fathonah et al. (2017), which stated that depressive symptoms occurred in fewer than half of the boarding student respondents, likely due to the tension of facing academic competition and the lack of emotional parental presence.

Anxiety

In contrast to depression, the results of this study show that anxiety did not differ significantly between grades X, XI, and XII. This finding does not mean that anxiety is not a significant problem for students; rather, it indicates that the experience of anxiety is likely distributed relatively evenly across all grade levels. Within a boarding school system based on the cadet model, sources of anxiety may be continuously present across all grade levels, for example through academic evaluation, disciplinary demands, social adaptation, and daily behavioral monitoring (Najich et al., 2024). Therefore, grade level is not a sufficiently strong factor to statistically differentiate average anxiety levels, because all students are within an equally demanding institutional structure. This interpretation is in line with Becker and Börner-Ringleb (2025), who showed that students' anxiety is influenced not only by individual factors but also by class climate and the level of competition at school. In addition, Dong et al., (2025) showed that psychological support from family and peers is associated with symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress among secondary school students. In the Indonesian context, Pham et al. (2024) also emphasized that mental health problems among adolescents are quite high and are influenced by various risk and protective factors within their social context. Therefore, the absence of significant differences in anxiety between grade levels in this study is better interpreted as an indication that variation in anxiety is likely influenced more by individual experience and the quality of psychosocial support than by grade level alone.

Stress

The results of this study also show that stress did not differ significantly between grade levels. Although descriptively the highest mean stress was found in grade XI, the difference was not large enough to be considered statistically significant. This finding can be understood as an indication

that, within a boarding school environment based on the cadet system, stress is a relatively common experience shared by students across all grade levels. The packed schedule, consistent discipline, strict rules, and intense social interaction allow sources of pressure to be present collectively among all students. Within this framework, the differences between grade levels become relatively small because the basic pressures they face are almost identical. This explanation is in line with Steare et al. (2023), who identified academic pressure as a consistent factor associated with adolescent mental health problems, as well as Becker & Börnert-Ringleb (2025), who showed that student stress develops within a competitive school environment. In the Indonesian context, Hengky Irawan et al. (2025) reported that stress among boarding students is also related to factors such as length of stay in the dormitory, communication with peers, and social activity. Thus, the absence of significant differences in stress levels between grade levels in this study indicates that pressure within the boarding school system tends to be experienced broadly, rather than accumulating differently at particular grade levels.

Why Grade XII Is Not Higher Than Grade XI

These results differ from the initial assumption that higher grade levels would show greater distress. Several alternative interpretations can be put forward. First, grade XII students are likely more adapted to the boarding system after two years of undergoing the cadet routine. The experience of living within a structured system, consistent discipline, and a relatively stable pattern of social interaction can help students understand the demands of the environment and build better psychological adjustment. The literature on *positive education* shows that the capacity to adapt to the school environment develops through the repeated strengthening of coping, social relationships, and emotion regulation in everyday school life (Waters & Loton, 2019). In addition, Waters & Johnstone (2022) explained that an educational environment capable of consistently integrating *well-being*, social support, and positive habits can help students maintain psychological stability even within a high-demand education system. Thus, grade XII students in the context of a cadet-based boarding school may have reached a better stage of adaptation than students at earlier grade levels.

Second, grade XII students have likely developed more mature coping strategies than grade X or XI students. The experience of facing academic pressure, dormitory life, disciplinary rules, and social dynamics over two years can shape more adaptive *coping* abilities. Skinner et al. (2016) explained that *adaptive coping*, such as *problem-focused coping*, planning, and the use of social support, is associated with increased engagement, persistence, and psychological resilience in students facing academic demands. In addition, research on resilience and hope shows that the ability to endure under pressure develops through repeated experiences of facing challenges, so that more senior students tend to have better self-regulation mechanisms (Sun et al., 2023). In the context of a cadet school, the experience of living together within a semi-military system also enables the formation of peer social support and group solidarity that can strengthen coping with psychological distress.

Third, clarity of future goals approaching graduation can be a protective factor that helps stabilize the psychological condition of grade XII students. Toward the end of their schooling, students generally begin to have a clearer orientation regarding further education, careers, and personal aspirations. This clarity of future direction can enhance a *sense of purpose and hope*, so that academic pressure is not always interpreted as a threat, but as part of the process of achieving goals. Research shows that future orientation, hope, and resilience are positively correlated with

psychological well-being and the ability to cope with academic pressure (Sun et al., 2023). In addition, *balanced time perspective* and the ability to manage future goals are known to be related to improved academic adjustment and *psychological well-being* (Yan, 2025). Thus, the pressure approaching graduation in grade XII students does not always increase distress, but under certain conditions can actually provide motivation and a clearer direction in life.

Nevertheless, this interpretation still needs to be understood with caution. Some studies show that future orientation can also become a source of pressure when accompanied by family expectations, high academic competition, or certain social demands (X. Li, 2025). Therefore, contextual factors such as school culture, the social climate of the dormitory, the quality of teacher support, and peer relationships need to be considered in understanding the dynamics of distress among cadet school students. In other words, the lower distress among grade XII students is likely not caused solely by reduced pressure, but by the development of adaptive capacity, *coping, resilience, and a more directed life orientation*. These explanations remain tentative and require further testing through longitudinal research or qualitative exploration that specifically examines students' adaptation experiences in cadet-based boarding school environments.

Dynamics of the Cadet System and Role Burden Across Grade Levels

This selective pattern becomes easier to understand when viewed through the internal dynamics of the cadet system, which arranges hierarchy and command based on seniority. In this system, a student's position within the grade-level structure is not neutral, but rather determines the type and intensity of the role burden they bear. Grade X students, as new cadets, face an adaptation shock upon entering a total institution, including separation from family, compliance with strict routines, and adjustment to senior authority. This pressure tends to be acute and concentrated in the early phase, yet is relatively predictable because it is accompanied by "newcomer" status that still receives some leniency.

Grade XI students occupy an intermediate position that is transitional in nature; they no longer receive the protection of newcomers, but they also do not yet enjoy the psychological relief that accompanies approaching graduation. At the same time, they often bear a double burden, namely downward demands in the form of obedience to seniors and upward demands in the form of responsibility for mentoring juniors, which occur simultaneously with an increasing academic load. It is this "caught in the middle" condition that can theoretically explain the higher mean depression at the intermediate grade level. As for grade XII students, although they bear the highest formal authority and substantial academic demands approaching graduation, they are in a position that is relatively stabilized by mastery of the system, maturity of coping strategies, and clarity of their future horizon.

This role-burden framework also helps explain why the differences between grade levels appear only in depression and not in anxiety or stress. The intermediate position does not primarily generate the acute threat that typically triggers anxiety reactivity, but rather pressure that is chronic and self-referential, such as a feeling of being trapped, diffuse responsibility, and a diminishing novelty of experience, which is closer to the phenomenology of depression than of anxiety. A number of studies in the context of semi-military and boarding education show that a sense of mattering (mattering), perceived support, and role clarity serve as buffers against distress among cadets (Gibson & Myers, 2006; Yi Chan & Trail, 2019). Consistent with this, the developmental

literature shows that depressive symptoms tend to peak during the mid-adolescent transition, rather than increasing linearly with advancing age and grade level (Aza et al., 2019). Thus, the cadet system does not produce a uniform escalation of distress across all grade levels, but rather differentiates the burden according to structural roles, with the intermediate group as the grade level most exposed to depressogenic conditions. This interpretation is theoretical and needs to be tested directly through the measurement of role, burden, and support variables in future research.

Position of the Research Findings in the Indonesian Context

When placed within the national context, the results of this study reinforce the evidence that the mental health of Indonesian adolescents, particularly in boarding school environments, is an issue requiring serious attention. Pham et al. (2024) showed that mental health problems among Indonesian adolescents are quite high, both in terms of psychological disorders and depression. In boarding school environments in Indonesia, Asri (2024) also found that depressive symptoms among boarding school students are a real problem, while Irawan et al. (2025) showed that stress levels among boarding school students in East Java are also at a level that requires attention. Therefore, this study does not stand alone, but rather extends the evidence that residential environments in Indonesia are a context that is sensitive to adolescent mental health. The specific contribution of this study lies in its focus on internal variation by grade level within a single seniority-based boarding school system. The results show that the three DASS dimensions do not always follow the same pattern: depression shows differences between grade levels, whereas anxiety and stress do not. This finding is important because it shows that psychological disorders should not be treated as a single, homogeneous construct. Thus, this study contributes to the advancement of educational psychology as well as guidance and counseling by emphasizing the need for more specific analysis of each dimension of mental health among boarding adolescents.

Practical Implications

From a practical perspective, the results of this study indicate that Guidance and Counseling services in cadet-based boarding schools need to be designed more contextually in accordance with the developmental dynamics of students at each grade level. Grade XI students appear to be the group most vulnerable to depressive symptoms, and therefore require more intensive attention than the other grade levels, especially because they are in a phase of academic transition, leadership demands, self-identity adaptation, and achievement-target pressure within a competitive semi-military environment. Meanwhile, anxiety and stress symptoms were found across grade levels, so they require preventive approaches that are systemic and continuous.

Based on these findings, Guidance and Counseling teachers in cadet schools are advised to hold stress management workshops periodically, especially when students first enter grade XI. This program can focus on emotion-regulation training, management of academic and dormitory pressure, simple relaxation techniques, adaptive coping strategies, and the development of self-compassion within a high-discipline culture. The workshops need to be packaged in an applied and

not overly formal way so as to suit the character of cadet students, who tend to be competitive and to suppress emotional expression.

In addition, the peer mentoring (peer support) system in the dormitory needs to be restructured so that it is oriented not only toward disciplinary supervision but also toward psychosocial support. Peer mentors from senior students can be equipped with basic training in active listening, early detection of behavioral changes, the provision of emotional support, and referral procedures to Guidance and Counseling teachers when indications of psychological distress are found. This approach is important given that boarding students interact more with peers than with family during their period of education.

Guidance and Counseling teachers also need to develop a periodic mental health screening system, for example at every change of semester or after phases of high academic pressure. Screening can be used to map students at risk of anxiety, stress, or depression, so that intervention can be carried out earlier before it develops into more serious psychological problems. Screening results should not be used merely as administrative data, but should become the basis for designing follow-up services such as individual counseling, group counseling, and responsive services based on student needs.

In the cadet environment, strengthening a supportive dormitory culture is also important. Therefore, collaboration among BK teachers, dormitory caregivers, cadet supervisors, and subject teachers needs to be strengthened through an integrated monitoring system for changes in affect, learning motivation, social withdrawal, and declines in student performance. This approach allows the school not only to maintain discipline and mental resilience, but also to continue attending to students' psychological well-being in a more humane and preventive way.

The findings of Ramadianto et al. (2022) show that coping strategies and resilience are related to symptoms of depression and anxiety in Indonesian adolescents, whereas Kaligis et al. (2023) show that module-based mental health interventions can enhance resilience and help with stress management. Therefore, BK services in cadet schools need to move from a purely corrective approach toward a developmental approach that is more proactive, preventive, and grounded in student mental health. On this basis, strengthening psychosocial support in the dormitory, facilitating healthy peer relationships, developing adaptive coping strategies, and the early monitoring of changes in affect and learning motivation are intervention directions that are feasible based on the results of this study. Nevertheless, the interpretation of the results must still be carried out with caution. The emphasis for each grade level is summarized in Table 9.

Table 9. Matrix of Guidance and Counseling Service Implications by Grade Level

Grade	Focus of Needs	Recommended Guidance and Counseling Services
X	Dormitory adaptation and a sense of belonging (<i>belongingness</i>)	Adaptive orientation, strengthening peer relationships, adaptation groups, monitoring of self-adjustment
XI	Monitoring of depressive symptoms and academic-social support	Scheduled depression screening, coping-focused group counseling, academic support, early detection of changes in affect and learning motivation
XII	Post-school transition and career anxiety	Career counseling, exam-anxiety management, transition preparation, future planning

The use of the DASS-42 in schools must be accompanied by confidentiality and adequate follow-up, and must not be used as a tool for selecting or punishing students. Screening results should be used to plan support, not for labeling. Because the DASS-42 measures symptoms and

not diagnoses, scores in the severe category require further assessment by a professional, rather than an immediate clinical conclusion. In addition to the contributions outlined above, this study also has certain novel aspects, implications, and limitations that are elaborated in more detail in the following sections.

Novelty of the Research

The novelty of this study lies in its approach of dissecting adolescent psychological distress dimension by dimension, rather than as a single construct, in the context of a cadet-based boarding senior high school that has rarely been studied in Indonesia. Most previous studies have tended to treat the mental health of boarding students as a single whole, whereas this study shows that depression, anxiety, and stress can display different patterns across grade levels. The finding that differences between grade levels appear only in the depression dimension, with the intermediate grade level (grade XI) as the most vulnerable group, makes a new conceptual contribution to understanding how the seniority structure and role burden within the cadet system interact selectively with particular dimensions of mental health.

Implications and Contributions

The findings of this study have several implications. Theoretically, these results reinforce the argument that the mental health of adolescents in boarding environments needs to be understood as a multidimensional construct, so that depression, anxiety, and stress cannot be treated uniformly in either assessment or intervention. Practically, the higher vulnerability to depression among grade XI students implies the need for guidance and counseling services that are more targeted at the intermediate grade level, for example through programs that strengthen resilience, support roles, and provide clarity of role transition within the seniority system. For administrators of cadet-based schools, these findings suggest that mental health monitoring should be conducted periodically and differentiated by grade level, rather than standardized. As for future research, these results open up directions for longitudinal and multivariate studies that directly measure role burden, social support, and dormitory climate as the mechanisms underlying differences between grade levels.

Research Limitations

This study has several limitations that need to be considered when interpreting its results. First, the cross-sectional design does not permit causal conclusions or the tracing of changes over time, so the differences between grade levels that were found cannot be interpreted as intra-individual development. Second, the data came from a single school, so generalization of the findings needs to be done with caution. Third, the use of a self-report instrument (*self-report*) administered in a whole-class setting may introduce bias, including a tendency to underreport symptoms due to stigma, the cadet culture, or concern that responses might be known to the school. Fourth, theoretically relevant contextual variables, such as academic pressure, social support, length of stay, role burden, and dormitory climate, were not measured directly, so the mechanisms underlying the differences between grade levels could not be tested. Fifth, the DASS-42 is a symptom-screening

tool, not an advanced clinical assessment, so the scores obtained cannot be used to establish a diagnosis and were not accompanied by an in-depth clinical risk examination.

Conclusion

This study concludes that differences in the levels of depression, anxiety, and stress by grade level among students in a cadet-based boarding senior high school do not emerge evenly across all dimensions of the psychological conditions examined. Differences appeared only in the depression dimension, indicating that grade level is a relevant factor, but that its influence is selective and not automatically the same for anxiety or stress. This finding also affirms that students' mental health in boarding school environments needs to be understood more specifically, not as a single construct, but as three psychological dimensions that can display different patterns according to the developmental context, academic demands, and dynamics of dormitory life. Thus, the research objective of analyzing differences in the levels of depression, anxiety, and stress by grade level has been achieved, while reinforcing the view that cadet-based educational environments require a reading that is more sensitive to variations in students' psychological vulnerability.

Based on this conclusion, guidance and counseling services in cadet-based boarding schools need to be directed toward strengthening promotive and preventive efforts that are more sensitive to students' developmental phases, particularly through monitoring depressive symptoms at the grade level that appears more vulnerable, without neglecting cross-grade needs in managing anxiety and stress. Schools also need to strengthen psychosocial support in the dormitory environment, build healthy peer relationships, provide safe and easily accessible help, and develop programs that support coping skills, emotion regulation, and resilience as part of comprehensive guidance and counseling services. At the scholarly level, these results affirm the importance of viewing depression, anxiety, and stress as dimensions that do not always move in the same direction within the boarding education context. Therefore, future research is encouraged to expand the study to contextual factors such as social support, school climate, dormitory parenting patterns, and coping strategies, and to use longitudinal designs so that the dynamics of students' mental health can be understood more fully throughout their course of study.

Author Contributions

The contribution of each author to the research and the preparation of this article is described as follows. Author 1 contributed to the conceptualization of the research and the design of the methodology. Authors 2 and 3 contributed to drafting the article and conducting the literature review. All authors have read, edited, and approved the final version of this manuscript.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declare that there is no potential conflict of interest related to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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