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TẠP CHÍ KHOA HỌC XÃ HỘI, NHÂN VĂN VÀ GIÁO DỤC

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN STRESS, ANXIETY, DEPRESION AND FEAR OF COVID-19 AMONG STUDENTS AT DALAT COLLEGE

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Abstract: This study investigated the relationship between stress, anxiety, depression, and fear of COVID-19 among students at Dalat College during the pandemic. A cross-sectional design was employed, with 169 students (M_{age} = 19.83, SD = 0.93) completing the Vietnamese versions of the DASS-21 and FCV-19S. The results revealed that 42% of students experienced stress, 48.5% reported anxiety, and 30.8% displayed symptoms of depression, with 17.2% exhibiting all three conditions simultaneously. The mean score of the FCV-19S indicated a moderate level of fear (M = 19.95, SD = 5.58). A one-way ANOVA demonstrated significant differences in fear levels across groups with varying mental health conditions ($F(3,165)$ = 10.42, p < .001), with higher fear scores observed among those with multiple mental health conditions. Pearson's correlations showed significant positive associations between fear of COVID-19 and anxiety (r = .488, p < .01), stress (r = .341, p < .01), and depression (r = .243, p < .01). The findings highlight the cumulative psychological burden of the pandemic and underscore the need for early detection and integrated mental health interventions in educational settings to mitigate long-term consequences.

Key words: fear of COVID-19; mental health; stress; anxiety; depression.

1. Introduction

With its staggering transmission rates and significant mortality, the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic in late 2019 unleashed a global health crisis that profoundly disrupted all aspects of societal life, including mental health. Unlike other diseases, infectious outbreaks inherently evoke fear (World Health Organization, 2022). These converging factors have amplified global mental health challenges, notably stress, anxiety, and depression, especially among university students (Vilca et al., 2023; Zarowski et al., 2024).

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Students are particularly vulnerable when faced with stressors associated with significant life changes, such as academic pressures, career exploration, forming friendships, and achieving financial independence, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic (Tran et al., 2013). Numerous studies have established a strong link between the pandemic and increased anxiety, depression, and stress symptoms among students at all educational levels (Vilca et al., 2023; Wathelet et al., 2020; Zarowski et al., 2024). Fear of COVID-19, defined as the perceived threat from the virus encompassing its transmission, morbidity, and mortality triggers an uncomfortable emotional state (Ahorsu et al., 2022). Heightened fear can impair clear and rational thinking in individuals responding to the pandemic. This condition gives rise to a range of psychological and social challenges, including stigma, discrimination, grief, and, in severe cases, suicidal ideation (Ahorsu et al., 2021).

On May 5, 2023, the World Health Organization (WHO) officially announced the global health

emergency related to COVID-19 to be over (World Health Organization, 2023). However, this declaration did not lessen the necessity for ongoing research on the virus. In Vietnam, despite the successful containment of significant outbreaks and a gradual return to normalcy, the psychological consequences of the pandemic continue and require attention. Recent statistics reveal a resurgence of COVID-19 variants, though less perilous than previous strains; they still harbor the potential to provoke concern and reactivate dormant psychological tensions. This reality necessitates ongoing assessment and monitoring of community mental health, especially among high-risk groups. Understanding the psychological factors influenced by the fear of COVID-19 will empower clinical psychologists, educational institutions, and policymakers to develop preventive and therapeutic mental health support strategies, thereby mitigating the pandemic's lasting negative effects and preparing for future outbreaks.

In Vietnam, and specifically in Da Lat, social distancing measures and the sudden shift to online teaching during the fourth wave of COVID-19 may have impacted students' fears and psychosocial symptoms. Research conducted in Vietnam remains limited and tends to concentrate on narrower subgroups, such as graduating cohorts (Pham et al., 2021), instead of students attending provincial colleges. This gap in the literature leaves a lack of understanding regarding the prevalence and co-occurrence of stress, anxiety, and depression in non-metropolitan areas, as well as the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on these conditions in such regions. Therefore, the purpose of this research is to assess the prevalence of stress, anxiety, and depression, and to examine the interrelation of the COVID-19 fear with the overlapping mental health conditions among students at Da Lat College during the pandemic's fourth wave. The findings will help inform appropriate response strategies to support management during future outbreaks.

2. Materials-Methods

2.1. Data Collection and Procedures

This study used a cross-sectional descriptive design in conjunction with a convenience sampling method. Data were collected through online surveys administered via Google Forms during the COVID-19 pandemic, specifically from 12/2021 to 01/2022. Participation was voluntaryand students were provided with comprehensive information regarding the research objectives and procedures. The study sample consisted of 169 students (M_{age} = 19.83, SD = 0.93) from Dalat College during the academic year 2021–2022, of whom 163 (96.4%) were female. By academic year, most participants (51.5%) were third-year students, 40.8% were second-year students, and 7.7% were first-year students. In terms of living arrangements, 82.2% of students resided with their families, 5.3% lived in dormitories, and 12.4% rented private accommodations.

2.2. Measures

The Vietnamese version of the 21-item Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scale (DASS-21). For this study, the DASS-21 was used to evaluate self-reported emotional states among students at Dalat College over the past week, including 21 items scored as follows: (0) – *Did not apply to me at all/Never*; (1) – *Applied to me to some degree, or some of the time/Sometimes*; (2) – *Applied to me to a considerable degree, or a good part of time/Often;* (3) – *Applied to me very much, or most of the time/Almost Always*. Results were classified into five severity levels: normal (no symptoms), mild, moderate, severe, and extremely severe. The Vietnamese version of the DASS-21 was adapted by Tran et al. (2013). The Cronbach's alpha coefficients for the stress, anxiety, and depression subscales were .798, .711, and .843, respectively, while the overall scale reliability was .882. The DASS-21 scoring conversion method is detailed in Table 1 below.

Table 1. *Cut-off Scores for Conventional Severity Labels of the DASS-21*

Severity	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
N.B. Scores on the DASS-21 must be multiplied by 2 to obtain the final score.			

The Fear of COVID-19 Scale (FCV-19S). The FCV-19S consists of 7 items designed to assess people's level of fear about COVID-19. The Vietnamese version of the FCV-19S was adapted by Nguyen et al. (2020). The coefficients of skewness and kurtosis of the scale were within the range of -1 to 1, which confirms the assumptions of normality and permits parametric statistical analyses (Hair et al., 2019). Total scores range from 7 to 35, with higher scores indicating a greater COVID-19 fear. The Cronbach's alpha for the FCV-19S in this study was .865. The severity classification criteria based on the mean scores (M) of the FCV-19S are as follows:

–Mild fear level: $1.00 \leq M \leq 2.33$.

–Moderate fear level: $2.34 \leq M \leq 3.67$.

–Severe fear level: $3.68 \leq M \leq 5.00$.

2.3. Data Analysis

We used SPSS version 27 software to analyze the collected quantitative data. The statistical measures employed included mean scores (M), frequency (N), percentage (%), one-way ANOVA, and Pearson's correlation coefficient (r).

3. Results

3.1. Mean score of COVID-19 fear and stress, anxiety and depression levels of students at Dalat College

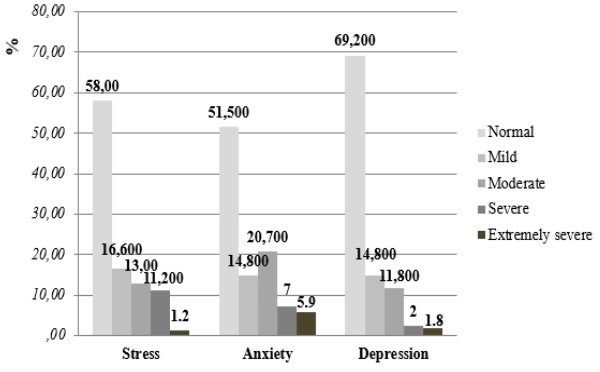


Figure 1. *Prevalence of Levels of Stress, Anxiety, and Depression among Students*

The mean scores for stress, anxiety, and depression among students at Dalat College, as measured by the DASS-21 (after being multiplied by 2), were 14.08 (minimum = 0.00, maximum = 42.00), 8.01 (range = 0.00 to 28.00), and 6.70 (range = 0.00 to 42.00), respectively. The mean total score for FCV-19S was 19.95 (*SD* = 5.58), which indicates that students at Dalat College experienced a moderate level of fear of COVID-19. As illustrated in Figure 1, most of the students (58%) reported no symptoms of stress, while 16.6% reported mild stress, 13.0% reported moderate stress, 11.2% reported severe stress, and 1.2% reported extremely severe stress. In terms of anxiety, 51.5% of students indicated that they had no symptoms, whereas 48.5% displayed anxiety at mild (14.8%), moderate (20.7%), severe (7.1%), and extremely severe (5.9%) levels. Additionally, 69.2% of students showed no signs of depression, while 30.8% exhibited depressive symptoms at mild (14.8%), moderate (11.8%), severe (2.4%), and extremely severe (1.8%) levels.

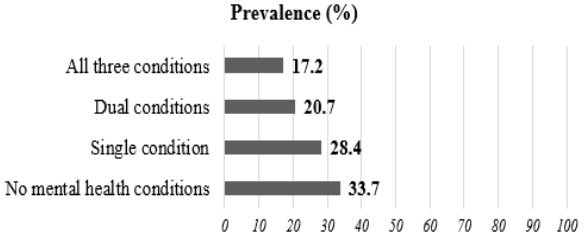


Figure 2. *Prevalence of Combined Mental Health Conditions among Students*

As illustrated in Figure 2, 28.4% of students experienced a single mental health condition, 20.7% exhibited a dual condition, and 17.2% had a combination of stress, anxiety, and depression, which indicates a significant psychological burden.

Table 2. *Comparison of Mean COVID-19 Fear Scores by Mental Health Condition Combinations*

Mental Health Condition Combinations	N	M	SD	One-way ANOVA	
				F	p
No mental health conditions (M1)	57	2.58	0.65		
Single condition (M2)	48	2.64	0.61		
Dual conditions (M3)	35	3.16	0.83	10.42	.000
All three conditions (M4)	29	3.36	0.95		
Total	169	2.85	0.80		
M3 > M1 (p = .006), **M3 > M2** (p = .016), **M4 > M1** (p = .002), **M4 > M2** (p = .004)					

The analysis of Table 2 reveals compelling patterns in the relationship between combinations of mental health conditions and levels of COVID-19 fear among Dalat College students. A one-way ANOVA indicated

significant differences in mean FCV-19S scores across various mental health condition groups ($F(3, 165) = 10.42$, $p < .001$). Students with a combination of stress, anxiety, and depression had the highest mean FCV-19S scores ($M = 3.36$, $SD = 0.95$). Students with simultaneous two conditions reported moderate COVID-19 fear ($M = 3.16$, $SD = 0.83$). Students with a single mental health condition reported lower COVID-19 fear scores ($M = 2.64$, $SD = 0.61$), whereas students with no mental health conditions had the lowest fear levels ($M = 2.58$, $SD = 0.65$). Post-hoc analysis results indicated that students with all three conditions and those with none or one condition showed significant differences in fear levels ($p < .05$).

3.2. Relationship between Stress, Anxiety, Depresion and Fear of COVID-19 among Students at Dalat College

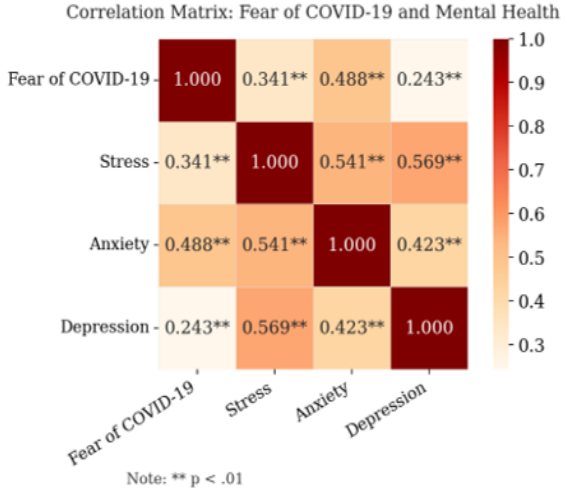


Figure 3. *Correlation Matrix between Mental Health and COVID-19 Fear*

The correlation matrix presented in Figure 3 demonstrates the relationship between fear of COVID-19 and the stress, anxiety, and depression of students at Dalat College. From the data analyzed, the most notable connection was observed between fear of COVID-19 and anxiety ($r = .488$, $p < .01$), indicating a significant positive correlation. Much weaker, yet still significant correlations were found between fear of COVID-19 and stress ($r = .341$, $p < .01$) as well as depression ($r = .243$, $p < .01$). Additionally, the other mental health variables also showed significant intercorrelation. The variable most strongly correlated with stress was depression, with a positive correlation of ($r = .569$, $p < .01$). This was followed by stress and anxiety ($r = .541$, $p < .01$) and by between anxiety and depression ($r = .423$, $p < .01$).

4. Discussions

The present study identified the correlation between the fear of COVID-19 and mental health outcomes, specifically stress, anxiety, and depression, among students at Dalat College. Additionally, it provides valuable insights into the mental health consequences of the pandemic for this demographic.

First and foremost, the prevalence rates of stress (42%), anxiety (48.5%), and depression (30.8%) are consistent with global studies regarding the negative impact of the pandemic on students' mental health (Wang et al., 2020; Wathelet et al., 2020). The notable co-occurrence of multiple mental health conditions in 37.9% of students – encompassing those with dual and all three conditions – highlights a compounded psychological burden, which aligns with previous research that emphasizes the vulnerability of university students to overlapping emotional disorders during health crises (Vilca et al., 2023; Zarowski et al., 2024). For instance, Ashiq et al. (2023) reported alarmingly high rates of depression (65%), anxiety (59.4%), and stress (51.2%) among Bangladeshi medical students during the first wave of the pandemic. Furthermore, Zarowski et al. (2024) highlighted in their literature review that university students across the globe are coping with higher levels of anxiety, depression, and stress due to academic isolation, social alienation, and a lack of support systems during the pandemic. This consistency highlights the pervasive impact of the pandemic's psychological issues on students, regardless of their geographical location.

This study focused on the relationship between the severity of mental disorders and fear of COVID-19. The highest levels of fear were observed in students suffering from all three conditions: stress, anxiety, and depression, followed by individuals with dual conditions and then those with either a single condition or no mental health issues. This gradient indicates that the fear response is intensified in individuals facing multiple mental health challenges, which is consistent with the hypothesis that psychological distress increases perceived threats and fear during a pandemic (Ahorsu et al., 2021). This pattern

is consistent with the prospective cohort study conducted by Autenrieth et al. (2024), which demonstrated that elevated fear of COVID-19 predicted long-term increases in anxiety, depressive symptoms, health-related anxiety, and psychosocial distress over a two-year period. The results reinforce the view that pandemic-related fear acts as a transdiagnostic risk factor that intensifies emotional vulnerability in individuals with existing psychological comorbidities.

The strong positive correlation between fear of COVID-19 and anxiety (r = .488, p < .01) supports previous research that identifies anxiety as the mental health domain most closely associated with pandemic-related fear (Ahorsu et al., 2021; Alimoradi et al., 2022). Anxiety often emerges as the most pronounced psychological response to the pandemic; however, more muted associations between pandemic-related fear and both stress (r = .341, p < .01) and depression (r = .243, p < .01) indicate that these reactions also contribute to the overall mental health burden. Several contextual and mechanistic explanations are consistent with these results. Pandemic-related disruptions to academic routines, such as abrupt transitions to remote learning, uncertainty about assessments, and reduced access to campus resources, as well as diminished social contact, are plausible drivers of elevated stress and depressive symptoms through social isolation and reduced opportunities for behavioural activation. In this context, fear acts as an emotional amplifier, intensifying the autonomic arousal and heightened vigilance characteristic of anxiety, with residual effects spilling over into stress and depressive symptoms when effective coping strategies do not materialize.

Despite the high rates of infection and mortality in the fourth wave of COVID-19 in Vietnam, students reported a moderate level of fear rather than experiencing severe anxiety, which may indicate the presence of effective coping strategies, an increase in health literacy, or a form of resilience developed throughout the pandemic. Such findings are encouraging and highlight the positive mental health outcomes within this population. However, the presence of severe and extremely severe symptoms in a concerning minority of students - specifically, 1.2% reporting extremely severe stress, 5.9% experiencing extremely severe anxiety, and 1.8% suffering from extremely severe depression - demonstrates an acute need for specific psychological treatments to prevent long-term adverse effects.

The findings indicate that 17.2% of students experienced all three mental health conditions simultaneously, a prevalence exceeding that reported in previous domestic studies (T. B. T. Nguyen et al., 2020). This suggests a significant impact on well-being, which may hinder academic performance and social functioning. The data also imply a progression from single to multiple mental health conditions, highlighting the necessity for early detection and comprehensive support systems within educational environments. Furthermore, the cumulative prevalence affecting two-thirds of the sample underscores the extensive psychological toll of the pandemic.

Taken together, the current results can be attributed to the multifactorial stressors caused by the pandemicincluding disruptions to academic routines, social isolation due to lockdowns, insomnia (Zhang et al., 2022), and widespread uncertainty about health risks (Lee et al., 2023). The significant correlations between fear of COVID-19 and mental health symptoms reflect how fear acts as both a psychological stressor and a mediator that exacerbates emotional distress. To counteract that ripple effect, public health experts now urge campuses to implement tiered interventions, combining self-guided therapy apps with in-person counselling. Psychoeducational seminars on panic management have shown promise, as have peer-led resilience circles that meet weekly to share coping strategies. Lawmakers are being urged to prioritize funding for such initiatives the next time a virus - or any other factor - disrupts face-to-face learning.

This study is subject to several limitations. The cross-sectional design precludes causal inference and does not permit examination of temporal dynamics (for instance, whether fear predicts later increases in symptoms). The sample was obtained via convenience methods and displayed a marked gender imbalance, which constrains generalisability. Measures were self-reported and thus susceptible to response biases. Future research should adopt longitudinal and mixed-methods designs, recruit more representative samples , and include finer-grained contextual variables,

such as students' mode of study during data collection, local restriction levels, and household vulnerability, to clarify mechanisms and identify protective factors such as coping strategies and social support.

5. Conclusion

During the fourth wave of COVID-19, students at Dalat College faced considerable psychological difficulties. Many reported moderate fear of the virus, together with high levels of stress, anxiety, and depression. Fear of COVID-19 was most strongly linked with anxiety, and also showed notable connections with stress and depression. Students experiencing multiple mental health conditions simultaneously tended to have the highest fear levels. As one of the first studies conducted in a provincial Vietnamese college, the current data underlines the importance of developing mental health initiatives tailored to the local context. Such efforts could include mental health awareness activities, regular screening for psychological difficulties, and accessible support options, whether delivered face-to-face or online. Future work should examine how fear, stress, anxiety, and depression interact over time, and identify which personal or environmental factors may protect students from the longer-term effects of pandemic-related distress.

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MỐI LIÊN HỆ GIỮA CĂNG THẲNG, LO ÂU, TRẦM CẢM VÀ NỖI SỢ COVID-19 CỦA SINH VIÊN TRƯỜNG CAO ĐẲNG ĐÀ LẠT

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Ngày nhận bài: 02-7-2025; ngày nhận bài sửa: 07-10-2025; ngày duyệt đăng: 20-10-2025

Tóm tắt: Nghiên cứu này khảo sát mối quan hệ giữa căng thẳng, lo âu, trầm cảm và nỗi sợ COVID-19 ở sinh viên Cao đẳng Đà Lạt trong thời kỳ đại dịch. Thiết kế nghiên cứu mô tả cắt ngang được áp dụng với 169 sinh viên (tuổi trung bình M = 19.83, SD = 0.93) hoàn thành phiên bản tiếng Việt của DASS-21 và FCV-19S. Kết quả cho thấy 42% sinh viên có dấu hiệu căng thẳng, 48.5% có triệu chứng lo âu và 30.8% có triệu chứng trầm cảm; 17.2% gặp đồng thời cả ba tình trạng. Điểm trung bình thang đo FCV-19S phản ánh mức độ nỗi sợ COVID-19 ở mức trung bình (M = 19.95, SD = 5.58). Phân tích ANOVA cho thấy mức độ nỗi sợ COVID-19 cao hơn ở những sinh viên đồng mắc cả ba tình trạng sức khỏe tâm thần ($F(3,165)$ = 10.42, p < .001). Hệ số tương quan Pearson cho thấy nỗi sợ COVID-19 có mối liên hệ đáng kể với lo âu (r = .488, p < .01), căng thẳng (r = .341, p < .01) và trầm cảm (r = .243, p < .01). Những kết quả này nhấn mạnh gánh nặng tâm lý đồng mắc và ủng hộ việc triển khai các can thiệp sức khỏe tâm thần tích hợp trong môi trường giáo dục nhằm giảm thiểu hậu quả lâu dài.

Từ khóa: nỗi sợ COVID-19; sức khỏe tâm thần; căng thẳng; lo âu; trầm cảm.