

FACTORS LEADING TO MENTAL DISTRESS OF VIETNAMESE STUDENTS IN THE US DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Abstract. This paper is conducted to scrutinize the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on the mental health of Vietnamese university students who are living and studying in the US. Specifically, the objective of this research is to survey the severity and the different grounds of mental distress among this population group throughout the awful pandemic. The result collected from the online questionnaire survey revealed that among 103 participants, 79.61% (n=76) experienced a mild-to-severe level of mental distress. This mental health issue is attributed to the increasing stressors related to studying, health, and general living triggered by the complicated COVID-19 outbreak situation.

Keywords: mental distress, psychological distress, COVID-19 pandemic, Vietnamese university students in the US.

1. Introduction

It is undeniable that the world has witnessed drastic changes (i.e, tremendous loss of human life and disruption of normal activities) due to the surge of the COVID-19 pandemic since early 2020. Recent studies revealed that the COVID-19 pandemic and its impacts have not only contributed to a physical health catastrophe but also adversely impinged on the mental well-being of many different population groups [1]. As a result, mental distress is more of a serious concern than ever besides the complicated situation of the pandemic [2].

Recent research has focused on noting that college students' mental health suffered significantly due to the pandemic's spread and the shutdown of university campuses. For instance, 71% of US college students revealed that they underwent a rise in COVID-19-related stressors, leaving them in a state of mental instability, according to Son et al.'s study [3]. In particular, international students were described to be a vulnerable group to mental distress during the pandemic since they might have to deal with more unique difficulties and concerns, which incurred additional burdens on their mental health [4]. Most studies conducted in different nations showed international students are at high risk of psychological distress during the course of the pandemic. Specifically, Chiara et al. [5] adopted the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10) in their study about the psychological well-being of foreign university students in South Korea and found that 70.5% of students reported suffering psychological distress, of which 29.5% said it was severe. Likewise, symptoms of psychological distress were shown by 71.4% of international students in China through a cross-sectional survey [6].

Received September 1, 2022. Revised October 14, 2022. Accepted November 5, 2022.

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Additionally, Lin et al. [7] indicated a significant increase in the prevalence of psychological distress among Chinese international students attending US institutions (78.35%) during the COVID-19 pandemic.

To explain the upsurge of mental distress among international students, some researchers have pointed to difficulties pertinent to learning, health, safety, and general living aspects that are arisen from the COVID-19 pandemic and its associated containment measures. They are supposed to be the possible causes of this well-being issue among the susceptible population group - the foreign students.

Academic-related concerns

In the face of the complicated situation of the pandemic, many universities have shifted to the form of online learning to stop the spread of the virus. Similar to domestic students, international students also confronted challenges when learning from a distance, such as inability to focus on screens, lack of engagement with lecturers and students, and decrease in learning motivation [8]. Minimal physical interaction between students and teachers resulted in a sense of isolation for the students in the online learning model, which is completely different from the conventional classroom, thereby hampering them from acquiring knowledge comprehensively as well as lessening their learning efficiency [9]. Thus, they struggled to maintain their focus while worrying about their academic performance [8]. Additionally, students might experience significant strain and discomfort due to challenges with unstable connectivity issues as well as the requirement to become used to new learning tools and software [10]. Besides, the pandemic's complications caused numerous expected events (e.g., internships, academic competitions and meetings, student exchange programs, and graduation ceremonies) to be postponed or even canceled. The restriction to open classrooms and laboratories, in particular, hindered the learning process of individuals who had to complete experimental and practical modules. In addition, according to Horgos et al. [10], the students were distressed and worn out whenever they wondered how long this deteriorating situation will persist as well as their future careers.

Health and Safety-related concerns

Since healthcare facilities in many nations, including the US, were not yet prepared to combat this pandemic, it is obvious that healthcare systems and providers were quickly overloaded and exhausted [4]. International students, therefore, were anxious about their limited access to healthcare services and facilities due to their lack of priority and lack of familiarity with the US insurance system and the high-priced healthcare for COVID-19 treatment [9]. Moreover, when faced with personal issues and psychological instability, students were limited in their access to mental health therapy or even did not obtain it due to the temporary suspension of counseling services provided on campus [4]. Plus, overseas students who are living far from home were indeed concerned about the well-being of their loved ones and friends, and this anxiety might greatly contribute to the mental distress of this population group [8]. Besides, the considerable ripple effect of the COVID-19 pandemic is the heightened racial harassment, xenophobia, and prejudice experienced by international students, particularly Asian students, as a result of the source of the COVID-19 outbreak. Anti-Asian sentiment in many Western nations and the US has surged more than ever since numerous individuals referred to COVID-19 as the *Wuhan virus* or the *Chinese virus* [11]. Thus, the rise of discrimination and racism could lead to negative feelings toward foreign students. What is more, some students feared insecurity about housing and food, and they felt unsafe living off-campus [10].

General living-related concerns

As Jeffrey [12] stated, students' poor mental health outcomes are related to their financial difficulties. The greatest financial hardships for international students may result from reduced on-campus and off-campus employment opportunities, the loss of part-time jobs, and the loss of parental income. All of these are derived from the widespread COVID-19, which forced many businesses and universities across the globe to close their doors. Also, additional concerns for international students during the pandemic included the unexpected rise in living expenditures (such as purchasing more masks and medicines, escalating in daily necessities and accommodation prices), as well as technology spending (e.g., installing faster transmission-speed broadband and purchasing technology devices and equipment) [11]. In addition, the distress of overseas students was exacerbated by changes in mobility and residency. They were unable to travel back to their home countries because of limited borders, costly flights to countries with open borders, or a lack of flights to some countries, all of which are the result of the temporary border closures brought on by the global pandemic [11]. The majority of overseas students felt stuck as a result, which aroused their homesickness even if they were not really in class. They were also shut off from a variety of cultural and social experiences due to the social distancing order that required overseas students to remain at home and placed restrictions on their travel. The policy changes under the Trump administration, such as the expulsion of international students who merely registered in online courses, may have contributed to their psychological burden in terms of immigration status and visa concerns [11]. Moreover, some international students reported that they had to change their living environment and lifestyle such as leaving the dormitory, seeking new housing, and having restricted or no access to the amenities and services available on-campus and public [13]. Furthermore, they felt isolated from their friends and larger communities as a result of the lessened social and physical contact brought about by donning a mask and avoiding busy areas [13].

Among foreign students in different countries, COVID-19-related mental distress among Vietnamese students studying in the US was documented remarkably in several recent news reports, since obviously, it is one of the nation's hardest hit by the pandemic worldwide [14]; nevertheless, there have been few studies delving deeply into the prevalence of mental distress among this foreign student group as well as ascertaining COVID-19-related stressors inducing their mental distress [15]. Hence, this study aims to explore the severity of mental distress among Vietnamese students in the US as well as identify the different causes engendering their mental distress throughout the pandemic. The following questions undergird this study:

- 1. What is the prevalence of mental distress among Vietnamese university students in the US during the COVID-19 pandemic?*
- 2. What are the causes that have led to the mental distress of Vietnamese students in the US during the COVID-19 pandemic?*

Through this research, Vietnamese students who are studying and residing in the US will have a likelihood to assess the mental distress difficulties they have faced throughout the entire pandemic, particularly in its early phases. Also, it can contribute to enriching the literature pool about mental health problems. Admitting the COVID-19 pandemic has progressively subsided, but it is inevitable additional unforeseen occurrences and more serious pandemics. Thus, this study is still likely to play crucial roles in future implications because they are possible to assist students, educational institutions, and organizations to predict and get ready for concerns and challenges likely to incur the student's mental health throughout the pandemic period, thereby providing them adequate and prompt protection measures and support.

2. Content

2.1. Research methodology

2.1.1. Data collection tool

This study utilized the quantitative approach with a questionnaire survey to obtain data and information. The researcher used Facebook and Messenger to send a link to the survey that was deployed in Google Forms to participants. The data collection took place from May 17th, 2022, to June 2nd, 2022.

2.1.2. Sampling

The research participants were Vietnamese university students living and studying in the US. This study is accessible to Vietnamese university students in the US of all ages, genders, universities, programs of study, and educational levels.

2.1.3. Questionnaire design

An English survey questionnaire comprises four following sections:

Personal information and status

The participant's email addresses, level of education, and residency status were all questioned in this part.

Measurement of mental distress level

To assess participants' levels of psychological distress, Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10) is adopted and modified. It consists of ten questions asking participants to rate how frequently they felt each of the ten different emotions (e.g., restlessness, nervousness, and depression) during the worst month since the pandemic started. On a 5-point scale, responses varied from *None of the time* to *All of the time*. Respondents are divided into four categories ranging from *No psychological distress* (10–19) to *Severe psychological distress* (30–50) according to their overall score.

Causal factors for mental distress

In order to identify and assess potential concerns and challenges inducing the mental distress of Vietnamese overseas students during the pandemic, the five-level Likert scale questions with the five categories (i.e., *Not experienced*, *None*, *Mild*, *Moderate*, and *Severe*) were employed in this section. The challenges and concerns were sorted out following the literature review with major aspects - studying, health and safety, and general living – each of which includes smaller issues. At the end of the section, an open-ended question is also asked to provide respondents the opportunity to add to any other issues or difficulties that have not been yet been stated in the sections above.

2.1.4. Data analysis

After sorting and filtering the data, the researcher found that only 103 of the 113 responses to the online survey were valid. To characterize the data, this study employed the descriptive analysis method. In particular, tables or charts with frequency and percentage statistics were used to illustrate the data, which comprise the prevalence of mental distress, and the causes of mental distress.

2.2. Findings and discussion

2.2.1. Sample demographics

The demographic characteristic of respondents from the questionnaire survey is shown in Table 1. Out of the 103 eligible individuals, undergraduate students (n= 83, 80.58%) ranging

from the first year to senior year outnumbered graduate students who are studying for master's degrees (n=11, 10.68%) and doctorates degrees (n=9, 9.71%). Besides, all Vietnamese students participating this survey reported having remained in the US during the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. From this sample group, the following results are found.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the respondents (N = 103)

Demographic characteristic	Frequency (n)	Proportion (%)
Academic level		
Undergraduate (Freshman, Sophomore, Junior, Senior)	83	80.58
Master's	11	10.68
Doctorate	9	9.71
Returning to Vietnam		
No	103	100

2.2.2. Mental distress level of Vietnamese students in the US

The change in stressors encountered by respondents throughout the pandemic is demonstrated in Table 1. Overall, the majority of them (83.50%, n=86) stated that the stressors impacting their mental health had increased during the pandemic. 14 (13.59%) of the remaining said theirs remained the same, and only 3 (2.91%) participants reported a decrease in their stressors. This result is comparable to Son et al.'s study [3]. Possibly, some people have adapted and taken advantage of the changes brought by the pandemic well, which may be why they saw a decrease in their stressors.

Table 2. Mental stressors for Vietnamese university students in the US (N=103)

The overall mental stressors	Frequency (n)	Proportion (%)
Decrease	3	2.91
Stay the same	14	13.59
Increase	86	83.50

Table 2 presents the level of mental distress of Vietnamese university students participating in this study based on the categories of the K10 scale that were previously specified in the study instrument. As shown in the chart, a large number of Vietnamese overseas students in the US (79.61%, n=76) went through mental distress of three different severities. It is clear that they mainly experienced mental distress in the mild (35.92%, n=37) and moderate (25.24%, n=26) levels. However, as many as 19 participants (18.45%) claimed to have undergone severe mental distress. Meanwhile, only around one-fifth (20.39%, n=21) of students reported normal or did not suffer psychological distress.

Table 3. Mental distress level of Vietnamese university students in the US (N=103)

K10 psychological distress category	Total K10 score range	Frequency (n)	Proportion (%)
No psychological distress	10-19	21	20.39
Mild psychological distress	20-24	37	35.92
Moderate psychological distress	25-29	26	25.24
Severe psychological distress	30-50	19	18.45

This result is consistent with Lin et al.'s study [7] on the percentage of psychological

distress of Chinese foreign students studying in the US. Nevertheless, this figure is marginally higher than those of foreign students in South Korea (70.5%) [5] and China (71.4%) [6] - both studies also employed the K10 (or K6) scale. The sample size may be a contributing factor to the observed difference between them. Also, overseas students in the US possibly had to encounter more mental challenges and stressors than students in other nations such as South Korea or China. As everyone is aware, the pandemic's intensity differs among countries, which might result in varying degrees of detrimental impact.

2.2.3. The causes of mental distress among Vietnamese students in the US

Academic-related concerns

As shown in Figure 1, there are roundly three-quarters of the participants had concerns and challenges connected to their studying. This outcome supported the findings of Horgos et al. [10], who came to the conclusion that students' mental suffering is associated with academic worries and changes. To be specific, the most striking one is that anxiety about academic progress and future professional plans caused mental distress in a very large majority of students (89.32%, n=92). In addition to this concern, Vietnamese students reported an increased study workload (85.44%, n=88), anxiety due to academic performance (81.55%, n=84), a lack of connection and interaction with classmates and teachers (81.55%, n=84), and difficulty in focusing in the online class (79.61, n=82) also triggered mental distress.

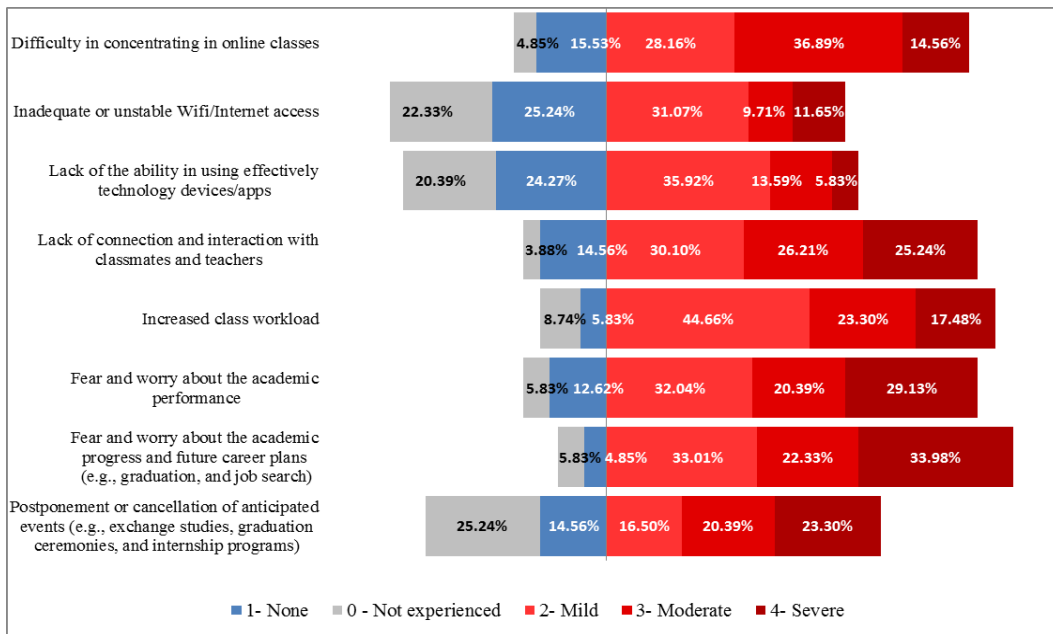


Figure 1. Academic-related concerns

Also, issues with Internet connectivity and technology use (52.43%, n=54) as well as the deferment or even cancellation of planned activities (such as internships, academic competitions and meetings, student exchange programs, and graduation ceremonies) (60.19%, n=62) impaired the mental well-being of Vietnamese students. However, the differences between the percentage of this student group and those who did not encounter or not consider that these concerns led to their psychological distress are not as pronounced as those of concerns discussed before. The explanation for these disparities is that some students perhaps were able to review the lecture via video recording in case their network connection is unstable, or they were

inherently well-adapted to the use of technology devices and applications; thus, these obstacles cannot constitute psychological burdens for all students. On the whole, based on the study's findings, it is clear that Vietnamese students have greater mental health burdens as a result of dealing with numerous issues and challenges in their academics aspects. These results concur with those of earlier studies by Xu [9], Horgos et al. [10], and Wang et al. [8].

Health and safety-related concerns

Overall, a host of Vietnamese university students in the study reported their mental distress was initiated by concerns regarding health and safety emerging from the pandemic (Figure 2). This result echoes those of Horgos et al. [10] and Wang et al. [8]. As the chart illustrates, it can easily be recognized that Vietnamese students were frequently more fretting over the health status of their loved ones than theirs. Specifically, less than a fraction of respondents revealed that their loved ones' health worries had a moderate or severe impact on their mental health, compared to those worrying about their personal health - making up nearly three-quarters of the total. Similarly, although 86.41% of participants ($n=89$) reported experiencing mental distress due to both the agitation of the hostility towards Asians and the food and housing insecurity, about two-thirds of them classified the latter as having a more detrimental effect on their mental distress than the former, which accounted for only 33.01%. The chart also noted that other issues such as restricted availability of counseling services), and restricted access to medical services and healthcare (66.99%, $n=69$) are also factors in the mental distress of Vietnamese students in the US during the COVID-19 outbreak.

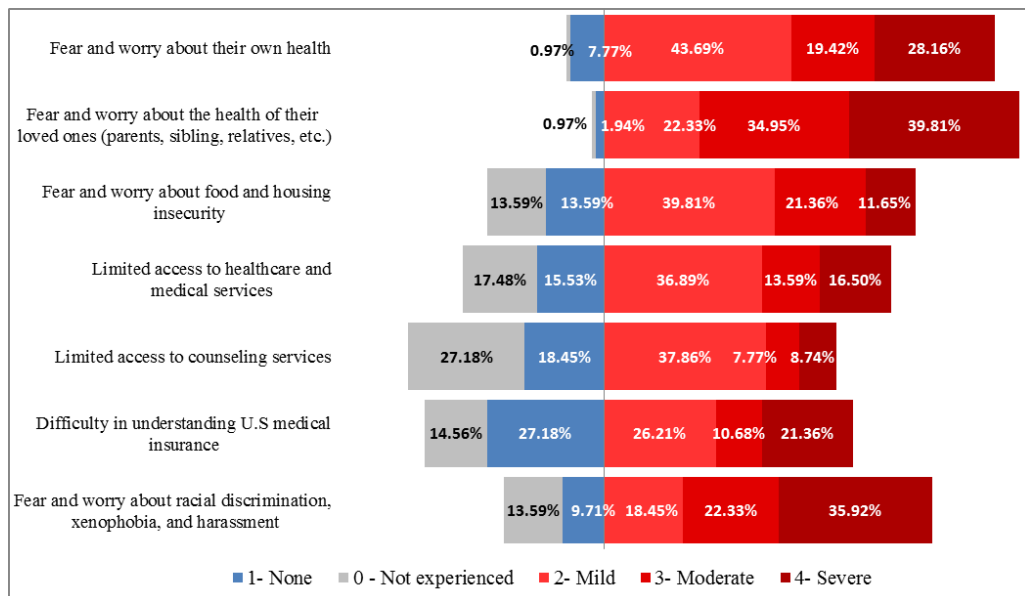


Figure 2. Health and Safety-related concerns

General living-related concerns

Generally, Figure 3 demonstrated concerns and difficulties related to general living aspects significantly added to the distress of Vietnamese overseas students in the US. Regarding changes in mobility and residency, travel constraints between the US and Vietnam engendered their mental discomfort is indicated by nearly four in five (79.61%, $n=82$) of the respondents. Other related issues also are listed including the limitation of being able to travel within the US (61.17%, $n=63$), and managing their student visa status (e.g., F1, J1) (58.25%, $n=60$). In

agreement with Chirikov & Soria [11], the insurmountable pandemic crisis in the US as well as the inability to return home country exacerbated their psychological well-being. Besides, stressors arising from the concerns of financial hardships stimulated the students' mental distress. These concerns emanated from losing part-time jobs, receiving insufficient financial support from family members (due to their job loss or wage reduction), decreasing on-campus and off-campus employment opportunities, and increasing unforeseen daily living and technology spending. Surprisingly, notwithstanding distress about the growing expense of living (68.93%), just nearly half of respondents reported experiencing actual agitation brought on by financial-related difficulties.

Nevertheless, when compared to many earlier investigations, for instance, Jeffrey's research [12], it did not seem to be as severe. This could be the case because these students received financial support from scholarship funds from schools, organizations, and the government, or they continued to be paid for the work they did from home. Additionally, around four-fifths of students said that the level of their mental distress is negatively compounded due to alterations in social relationships, self-isolation, and physical distancing throughout the pandemic. This finding is consistent with the findings of earlier studies, including Chirikov & Soria's [11] and Bäuerle et al.'s [13].

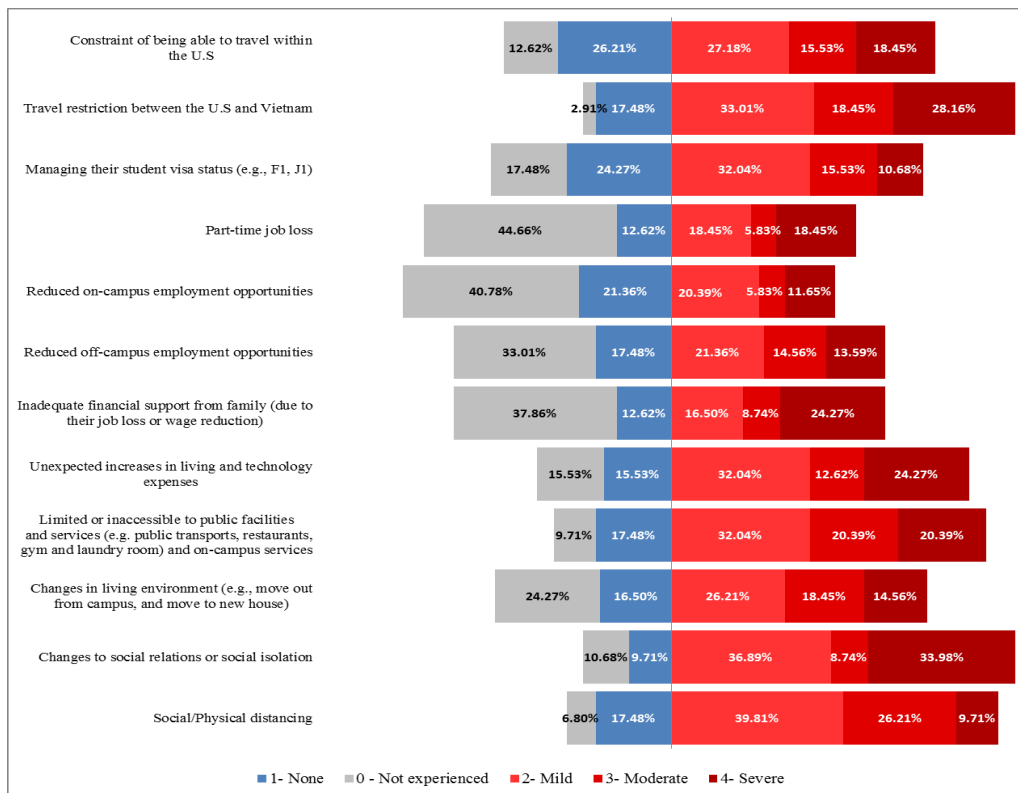


Figure 3. General living-related concern

3. Conclusion

The findings of this research revealed that during the COVID-19 outbreak, Vietnamese university students studying and residing in the US are prone to experiencing mental distress,

and they could be considered a vulnerable group. The pandemic exposed this student population to difficulties and worries surrounding aspects of their studies, health, safety, and daily living issues, thereby predisposing their psychological distress.

The limitation of this study is its small sample size and convenience sampling method, which means it may not fairly represent all Vietnamese university students in the US. Additionally, because of the cross-sectional nature of this study, only correlations and no causal conclusions can be drawn about the results. Therefore, the researcher suggests that future studies should be conducted with larger sample size and random sampling methods in order to increase the generalizability of the findings and enhance the subject's variability. Plus, researchers could collect qualitative data through in-depth interviews to dive further into the particular stressful events that had predisposed international students to mental distress. In addition, future studies could focus on more extensively examining the differences between the level of mental distress and demographic variables (e.g., gender, academic year, major).

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