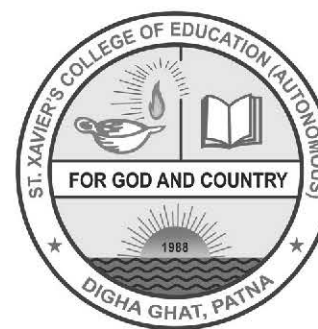


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Mental Health and Academic Stress in Post-Covid Campus Life

Abstract

The study examines the link between academic stress and mental health in 565 undergraduate college students in Kerala's Alappuzha district. The research found that stress was the most significant cognitive factor among students, with self-efficacy and self-demands playing a crucial role. The study also revealed a significant correlation between increased academic stress and poor mental health in all participants. The pandemic has increased stress levels, with female students reporting higher levels of academic stress than males. Extrinsically-motivated students reported the lowest mental health and highest levels of academic stress. The study suggests that there is a strong correlation between student's psychological well-being and academic stress, suggesting that more resources and support should be provided to these students.

Keyword: Academic Stress, Mental Health, Pandemic, Campus Life, Psychological Well-being, Adolescence, Academic Achievements

Introduction

Academic pressure may have a greater impact on the psychological wellness of college students than any other stressor. Some student characteristics may be more stressed than others, and it is significant that the COVID-19 pandemic may exacerbate stress reactions ((Barbayannis et al., 2022). Mental health issues, such as depression and anxiety, are common among college students as a result of the numerous physiological and psychological changes that occur between late adolescence and emerging adulthood (Golberstein et al., 2020). According to studies, worry throughout college life may be a predictor of a mental health diagnosis. A lot of factors contribute to the multifaceted stress that college students face (Karyotaki et al., 2020), regardless of gender or age. Anxiety, depression, and substance abuse disorders are among the many mental health conditions that commonly occur in adolescence and early adulthood, and five dimensions of sources, personal inadequacy, fear of failure, interpersonal difficulties with teachers, teacher-student relationships, and inadequate study facilities, have been identified as sources of these difficulties (Reddy, Menon, & Thattil, 2018).

Students in higher education system today face a wide range of academic difficulties, such as a heavy course load, prolonged study sessions, internal assessments and exams held consecutively, short semester durations, ineffective time management, uncompetitive peers, subpar classroom environments, financial concerns, family issues, and the influence of social media (Freire et al., 2020). Researches on coping mechanisms and self-efficacy expectations among college students emphasizes the value of planning, finding help, and adopting a positive mindset in order to effectively manage academic stress. Stress management for students can be achieved by striking a balance between academic work, play, diet, sleep, and exercise (Spagnolo, Manson, & Joffe, 2020). Students' dread of their future jobs stems from the current educational system's failure to provide them with exposure to the outside world and self-confidence building (Dimitrov, 2017). The lack of employment relevance of academic disciplines stresses out recent graduates. Ineffective stress management is also influenced by peer interactions and parental pressure (Bhatnagar, 1999).

Academic stress can severely effect motivation, achievement, and college dropout rates (Reddy et al., 2018). On the other hand, psychological functioning, happiness, life satisfaction, stress management, and positive mental health are all essential for general well-being (Khan et al., 2018). It has been demonstrated over time that positive mental health can anticipate both positive and negative

mental health markers (Baqutayan, 2011). More research into the relationship between academic stress and mental health is needed, as past studies have indicated that poor mental health has a negative impact on college academic achievement (Misra et al., 2000).

The Covid-19 outbreak interrupted the global educational system, forcing many institutions to close and learners to continue their education at home. The pandemic has resulted in a major learning deficit for students, leading to greater passivity and disengagement from their studies. Teachers struggled with online learning owing to a lack of digital skills, while students struggled with technology access and a supportive home environment (Di Pietro, 2023). The pandemic has often resulted in high absenteeism and illness rates, both of which have an impact on students' mental health (Bashir et al., 2019). The study sought to investigate the academic stress and other mental health issues experienced by college students in the post-COVID-19 days in order to assess the educational impact of COVID-19 over time. The study investigating the association between academic stress and mental health among college students. It is hypothesized that psychological instability may result from elevated academic stress, with specific groups being more affected by COVID-19 and academic stress than others. The significance of psycho-social counseling services on college campuses was emphasized by the study. It was discovered that among students who got therapy, there were notable variations in the reported problem categories for relationships, family, victimization, anxiety, and depression. The results have consequences for future policy, practice, and additional research.

Objectives of the Study

The study's major objectives are

- To assess the relationship between perceived academic stress and mental well-being in college students.
- To identify groups experiencing differential levels of academic stress and mental health.
- Exploration of how the perception of the COVID-19 pandemic affects stress levels.

Hypothesis

- Students experiencing more academic stress will have worse psychological well-being.
- COVID 19 pandemic situation resulted in an increase in mental health problems among college students
- Mental health problems lead to learning disabilities, academic stress among college students

Methodology

The study employed an ex post facto design to collect data on the students' psychological state and level of academic stress. In the second semester of 2022, undergraduate students from all programmes and faculties of aided, unaided, and government colleges in the Alappuzha district of Kerala State participated in a cross-sectional, descriptive, relational, and analytical study. To assess academic stress and mental well-being among college students, the survey method is used with 'Short Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-Being Scale' and the 'Perception of Academic Stress Scale'. This is a mental health measure that only considers the positive aspects of mental health. It shows promise as a tool for population-level mental health monitoring because it is a brief, psychometrically sound scale without ceiling effects in a population sample. The survey included questions from both scales, with higher scores indicating better mental health and lower levels of stress. Using Pearson's correlation analysis, a sample of 565 students from particular colleges in the Alappuzha district is evaluated. The study examines the relationship between undergraduate students reported academic stress and psychological well-being, identifying stress-prone groups and the COVID-19 pandemic's effects on stress levels. The association between student stress and psychological wellness was examined using statistical and econometric tools, including Pearson correlation and HMLR analysis. The results showed a complicated interaction between these variables.

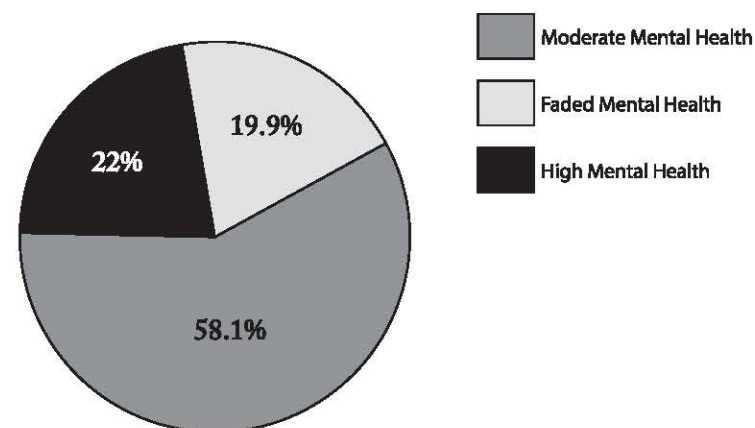
Results and Discussion

Stress is a natural physiological and psychological response to challenging situations, but excessive exposure can have long-term physical and mental effects. Chronic stress can lead to anxiety disorders, depression, and other mental health issues, negatively impacting cognitive functioning and emotional regulation. Academic stress, especially in higher education, can manifest in anxiety, depression, and emotional exhaustion, negatively affecting students' psychological well-being. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated this stress, with over 1.2 billion students without face-to-face education access. Universities have had to adapt their academic models, such as hybrid, multimodal, flexible, and blended, to ensure student health and well-being, provide timely administrative services, and improve academic quality. Also financial stress, anxiety, and depression can negatively impact university students' mental health.

The participants mean age is 19.6 years. The study analyzed academic stress and mental health, with a mean of 2.67 points and no outliers. The

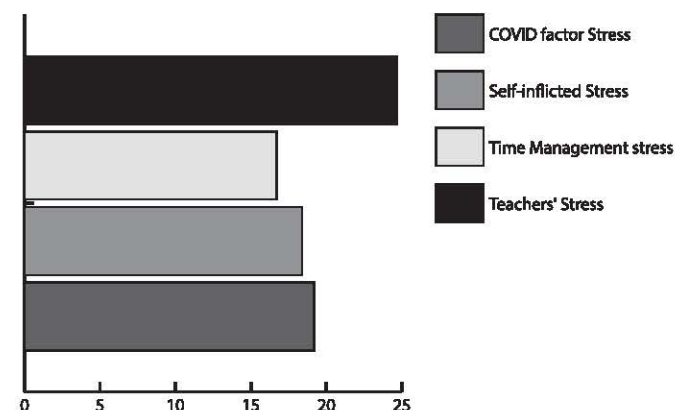
mean of academic stress was categorized into seven stressors: Teachers' Stress (TES), Results Stress (RS), Test Stress (TS), COVID factor Stress (CFS), Peer Stress (PS), Time Management Stress (TMS), and Self-inflicted Stress (SIS). The mean of mental health was 2.13 points, with no significant outliers. The study found that 19.9% of students had Faded Mental Health, 58.1% had Moderate Mental Health, and 22% had High Mental Health.

Figure 1: Students Mental Health (Primary Data)



The primary academic stressors were related to Teachers' Stress (24.7%), Time Management Stress (16.7%), and Self-inflicted Stress (18.4%) and COVID factor Stress (19.2%). These factors were influenced by students' beliefs, perceptions, and feelings about their ability to handle the context.

Figure 2: Primary Academic Stressors (Primary Data)



There are significant negative correlations between all academic stressors and mental health levels. Among the academic stressors, Teachers' Stress and Peer Stress showed weak negative correlations, followed by Test Stress and Time Management Stress. The Self-Inflicted Stress had a moderate negative correlation. Even though Result Stress and COVID factor Stress has showed moderate positive correlation. The results showed that students with medium levels of SIS had a higher probability of experiencing faded Mental Health. High levels of TMS, CFS, and RS also increased the probability of experiencing faded Mental Health. These findings suggest that academic stressors can significantly impact mental health levels and predict the likelihood of experiencing mental health issues. The correlation between stress factors and mental health shows that academic stress is linked to self-generated stress, with a moderate correlation. This can lead to a constant feeling of dissatisfaction or failure, as it is linked to self-perception of sufficiency, beliefs about one-self's ability to respond to environmental demands, and mental schemes about one's abilities.

Regarding the impact of COVID-19 on stress levels among college students, findings varied among categories in terms of stress responses due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The study involved 72.5% girl students. The boys were less likely than girls to report increased stress from COVID-19 pandemic. For the year of study, first-year students were less likely to report increased stress from COVID-19. The results showed that higher academic stress was associated with worse mental well-being in general, regardless of age, gender or year of study. The scores were significantly correlated, indicating that a higher level of perceived academic stress is associated with worse mental well-being in college students. The study also demonstrated that college students are not uniformly impacted by academic stress or pandemic-related stress, with significant group-level differences in mental well-being.

This suggests that colleges should consider offering tailored mental health resources, such as time management and study skill workshops, based on the year of study to improve students' stress levels and psychological well-being. The study revealed that a majority of respondents, all of whom had never used on-campus counseling services, were aware of the existence and availability of such services. 96% of respondents were previously aware of their school's counseling center, and 93% were aware of the free services. The first-year class had the lowest awareness, with a 90% rate of awareness of the counseling service and an 86.7% rate of awareness of the free services. Other classes had mid-to-upper 90% awareness.

The study also finds 12 reasons why college students do not seek mental health services. The most common reasons were having friends or family, dealing with problems themselves, not being serious enough, and believing their problems will get better without counseling. These reasons are not

indicative of a strong barrier preventing a student from seeking counseling, but rather indicative of resiliency. Other reasons included perceived lack of time, discomfort, and stigma. A large proportion of students with significant anxiety or depression concerns cited discomfort and stigma reasons for not seeking counseling. Access to the counseling center was another potential barrier, with a larger proportion of anxiety and depression students citing waiting too long for counseling. Understanding these factors and offering support can help college students improve their academic performance as well as their mental health journey. This can be done by the authorities and college teachers.

Conclusion

The study reveals mental health issues faced by college students during their transition from adolescence to adulthood. These issues include adjustment issues, academic problems, personal development concerns, and interpersonal conflicts. There is significant correlation between perceived academic stress among college students and their mental well-being, particularly among girl students. Girl students were disproportionately affected by stress related to the COVID-19 pandemic. This research adds value to understanding academic stress as a contributor to college students' overall well-being during the pandemic. The current educational setting fails to meet these needs, leading to problem behaviors and mental health concerns. A comprehensive counseling program could help adolescents navigate confusion and excitement, enhancing their productivity.

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