The Student Stress At Vietnamese Universities: A Cross-Sectional Study

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Abstract

Stress is a well-known topic that has been conducted around the globe for many decades. However, its implication in the Vietnam context is questionable when rare studies have been researched until now. In addition, the number of Vietnamese students dropping out of local universities has been rising for a few years, which raises concerns about stress inside the studying environment. Therefore, this study aims to fulfil this gap by investigating the degree of student stress in Vietnamese universities. In detail, we explored the stress of Vietnamese students in two universities in the Middle and the South of Vietnam. The original scale is English, so it is translated into Vietnamese and confirmed by two local experts who are fluent in both languages. 325 surveys were collected at two separate times to avoid common method bias. The results highlighted that stress exists in students in two Vietnamese universities, and males experienced more stress than females. Moreover, the fourth-year students experienced more stress than the below groups. The solution to solving this problem is that universities should reduce their workloads. In addition, training programs on stress management and life skill should be conducted in Vietnamese universities.

Keywords: Stress, Vietnam, University student, Gender, Academic seniority.

Introduction

The rate of suicidal thoughts in Vietnamese young adults has been increasing steadily in recent years, from 4.4% in 2010 to 7.5% in 2021, particular in the group age of teenagers (14 – 17 years old) and students (18 – 22 years old). In 2022, there were two suicidal cases in Vietnam, and the victims were fourth-year students, who were preparing to defend their bachelor theses. As such, several inquests have been conducted to find out the causes leading to this issue, and one of the main reasons is the overload stress due to the high pressure of a bachelor thesis's defence. In other cases, the victim's relatives also regarded stress as the reason to explain the problem. It is important to note that stress is likely a serious problem that detrimentally affects students' mental health. However, rare research about stress has been conducted in the Vietnamese context in general and universities in general (Nguyen et al., 2016; Tran, 2020a; Tran, 2020b). According to Tran (2020a), younger adults experienced more stress than older ones in state enterprises. Further, Tran (2020b) suggested that Vietnamese males had more frequency of stress than females in several enterprises. In the educational institution context, Nguyen et al., (2016) showed that there is a positive relationship between stress and high-intensity studying courses in Vietnamese high schools. In other words, young local teenagers would be stressed when they must work on too much homework and courses. In addition, Tran et al., (2020a) found a significant link between stress and high workload in one Vietnamese university.

The number of literature about stress in Vietnamese higher education is so modest that it is necessary to have more additional studies to fill

in this gap. Moreover, none of the cross-sectional stress studies has been conducted in Vietnamese universities, so it is impossible to understand whether there is a difference in the level of stress between gender, academic seniority, and location in Vietnamese universities. This research opens the scope of this field in a broad context, as this is the first study to find the association between students' demographic variables and the degree of stress.

The following chapter describes an overview of the Vietnamese context, local educational systems, stress theory, and hypothesis for this study. Further, the methodology section will test the validity of the literature, followed by a discussion and conclusion.

Literature review

The Vietnamese Context

Vietnam, or The Socialist Republic of Vietnam, is a country in the Southeast Asia context. The country's population is approximately 100 million, and 70% of people have been living in the countryside. The country has three megacities, namely Hanoi (the capital) in the North, Da Nang in the Middle, and Ho Chi Minh in the South. Vietnamese is the official language, followed by English as the second language. Vietnam had been colonized by China for one thousand years before getting independence in the 10th century. As a result, these Chinese cultural values (e.g Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism) have been embedded in Vietnamese society during that time and have become a core cultural system. Later, this country has a complicated history due to being colonized by France, Japan and the United States in the 20th century before getting entirely national independence in 1975. As such, Communism has been the dominant political system, which controls all national activities, including the educational system.

The Vietnamese educational system

The Vietnamese educational approach is under the control of the government, particularly the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET). In detail, the MOET has a responsibility to organize the studying hierarchy for all levels from kindergarten to university. Moreover, they also design the course volume, exams and criteria for all programs. Each educational institution has a principal, who has enough right to give the final decisions on all activities. Moreover, a principal is also the government's representative who must obey all decisions from MOET. Vietnam has 224 universities, particularly in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh cities, which are the largest megacities. The educational program is divided into two types: national science and social science. The average training duration is four years, except for special fields such as doctor, law, and military.

Stress in the educational sector

Stress is regarded as an unavoidable problem in current human life. Much research indicated that the more economy is developing, the more stress people must experience (Fenwick & Tausig, 2007; Friedline, et al., 2021; Siegrist et al., 2016). As Fenwick and Tausig (2007) pointed out, the current lifestyle is towards material values (e.g. money, status, etc.), so people cope with extreme pressure to earn as much money as possible, or climb to a higher position to receive high respect from the community. As a result, the competition is so high that everybody attempts to gain these values. In reverse, they would be in a terrible situation if they are left behind or become the "loser" in their current material life. In detail, the younger group age, who are less than 25 years of age is regarded as having a serious mental health (Bovier et al., 2004). According to Dahlin et al., (2005), the young group age (18 – 22 years old) experienced higher mental health than other group age in the United States due to pressure on tuition fees, and job concerns. The same result was identified in the study of Abdulghani et al., (2011) in Saudi Arabia when students were

stressed with course curriculum and personal issues.

Over the years, literature has suggested that the impacts caused by stress would be detrimental, particular in young adults, as they lack the experiences to deal with this issue. This problem becomes more frequent at higher academic levels with the targets as those who are studying in bachelor's and postgraduate programs. A series of studies established various reasons leading to student stress at the bachelor level (Bound et al., 2009; Dunkel-Schetter & Lobel, 1990; Pascoe et al., 2020). First, heavy workloads are the primary cause, particularly in high-ranking universities. According to Dunkel-Schetter and Lobel (1990), United States students in top local universities often experience daily stress because of heavy homework and extra activities. In other cases, their peers in the European context reported tensions in more various causes, namely classmates, family, and studying – working balance (Bound et al., 2009). However, the number of cross-sectional studies about stressors in the university context is modest, as rare studies have investigated the linkage between the frequency of stress and demographic variables.

In line with Confucius countries, education plays an important role in Vietnamese society. An individual with higher education background will not only ensure an optimistic future but also contributes to his/her pride in family and society (Huy et al., 2012). As such, the pressure to qualify for a bachelor's program is so heavy that all young Vietnamese adults must attempt to overcome it. According to Nguyen et al., (2016), Vietnamese students admitted that they experience mental health problems during the national entry examinations to enrol in the university. During the last decades, a piece of literature investigated that Vietnamese young adults cope with mental health issues (Anh, 2007; Hang, 2012; Tuan et al., 2003). According to Tuan et al., (2003), young adults (18 – 25 years of age) were the age group experiencing the most

frequency of stress compared with middle adults (26 – 59 years of age) and elder adults (60 years of age and above). Anh (2007) suggested that 16% of pupils in the Vietnam South's high schools had stressful problems relating to school workload and exam pressure. In the same view, Hang (2012) highlighted that 47% of students in the last year of one high school in Hanoi experienced overload stress.

The above literature expresses an overview of the serious situation of Vietnamese young adults' stress. However, a lack of current studies identifies the stress of students at the bachelor level. Moreover, none of them examined cross-sectional research to find out the linkage between stress and demographic variables. As such, this research has two objectives. First, it aims to fulfil the gap by investigating the issue of student stress in Vietnamese universities. Second, as none of the previous studies has been conducted on the relationship between stress and student demographics, it is the first study comparing the frequency of stress between gender, academic seniority, and location. In other words, the linkage between stress scores and these demographic variables will be examined clearly. The main research question is: Which demographic variables affect the frequency of student stress in Vietnamese universities?

To answer this question, we establish three below hypotheses:

H1. Vietnamese male students will have a different frequency of stress than female students

H2. Vietnamese students studying in the university in the Middle will have a different frequency of stress than those studying in the university in the South.

H3. Vietnamese students with various academic seniorities will have different frequencies of stress.

Research method and sample

The self-administered technique was used in this study. English was the original language of the

questionnaire, so we distributed it to one language expert for translation into Vietnamese. Later, the Vietnamese version was sent to one person who was native in both English and Vietnamese to re-examine the similarity between the two versions. As a consequence, the expert confirmed the correctness of the Vietnamese version. This research selected the Overload Stress Inventory (Hyde and Allen, 1996) to investigate the stress frequency of Vietnamese students. There were ten items in the questionnaire, which had a score range from 1 (Never) to 5 (Always). The answers were estimated based on the below criteria:

- 40 – 50 scores: Extremely high level of stress
- 30 – 39 scores: High level of stress
- 20 – 29 scores: Average level of stress
- 0 – 19 scores: Low level of stress

Several sentences introducing the research's objective, confidentiality and guideline were attached to each survey. In addition, a blank paragraph about the participant's answers was also added at the end of the survey. This study collected business administration students' responses from two Vietnamese universities in the Middle and South. To avoid the common method bias, we collected data at two separate times. In time 1, we collected data from the first university in the Middle. The duration time was two months; as a result, 203 surveys were received from voluntary students. After eliminating the invalid responses, 175 surveys were valid. In time 2, the duration time was one and a half months; as a result, 196 surveys from the second university in the South were received. After removing the invalid responses, 150 surveys were valid. Finally, a total of 325 responses were used for further analysis.

The demographic characteristic is shown in Table 1. To calculate the demographics, each variable is coded as follows: Gender (Male = 1 and Female = 2), Location (the Middle = 1 and the South = 2), and the academic seniority (the 1st year = 1, the 2nd year = 2, the 3rd year = 3, and the 4th year = 4).

Table 1. Demographic information of the Vietnamese sample (n = 325)

	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Male = 1	197	60.61
Female = 2	128	39.39
University		
The first one = 1	175	53.84
The second one = 2	150	46.16
The academic seniority		
1st year = 1	58	17.84
2nd year = 2	77	23.69
3rd year = 3	81	24.62
4th year = 4	109	33.85

SPSS software was used to calculate the data analysis. More detail, exploratory factor analysis, descriptive statistics, analysis of variance (ANOVA), and paired T-test were selected to

investigate the difference in stress in location, gender, and academic seniority.

Results

The preliminary step of factor analysis is to examine the adequacy and validity of the sample.

According to Kaiser (1974), a KMO (Kaiser–Meyer–Oklin) score higher than 0.5 is likely to be valid for further analysis. As such, the KMO in this study is 0.987 for all items. The finding of the KMO is shown in table 2.

Table 2: KMO and Bartlett's test for this research

Variables	Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin measure of sampling adequacy	KMO and Bartlett's test		
		Approx. chi-square	df	Sig.
Stress	0.987	1541.456	150	0.000*

Note. (*) < 0.05

Later, as Nunnally (1978) pointed out, factor loadings and Cronbach's Alpha with the values being higher than 0.4 and 0.7 are regarded as

valid. As a result, the results in this study meet the standard conditions. All findings are shown in table 3.

Table 3: Findings of factor analysis and reliability test for this research

Factor constructs and items	Factor loading	Eigenvalue	Alpha if item deleted	Cronbach's alpha
Item 01	0.560	5.645	0.543	0.876
Item 02	0.601		0.642	
Item 03	0.768		0.750	
Item 04	0.564		0.675	
Item 05	0.674		0.574	
Item 06	0.459		0.654	
Item 07	0.743		0.765	
Item 08	0.703		0.845	
Item 09	0.587		0.894	
Item 10	0.682		0.469	

Stress and gender

We used analysis of variance (ANOVA) and paired T-test to test the hypothesis. Table 4 highlights that there is a significant difference in stress between men and women (F = 14.522, p = 0.00). As seen in table 5, male students

experienced more stressful than female students (mean difference = 9.463, p = 0.004). Therefore, there is a difference in the frequency of stress between male students and female students, so hypothesis 1 is supported.

Table 4: ANOVA – Gender

		Sum of Squares	F	Sig.
Stress	Between Groups	184.020	14.522	.000*
	Within Groups	5800.345		
	Total	5984.365		

Note. (*) < 0.05

Table 5: Post Hoc tests: Multiple gender comparisons

Dependent variable	(I)Gender	(J)Gender	Mean difference (I-J)	Std. error	Sig	95% Confidence Interval	
						Lower	Upper
Stress	Male	Female	9.463	.467	.004*	2.454	0.776

Note. (*) < 0.05

Stress and university
Table 6 highlights that there is an insignificant difference in stress between the two universities ($F = 13.465$, $p = 0.765$). As seen in table 7, although students in the first university experienced more stress than those in the second one, the difference is insignificant (mean difference = 11.432, $p = 0.214$). Hypothesis 2 is rejected.

Table 6: ANOVA – University

		Sum of Squares	F	Sig.
Stress	Between Groups	202.111	13.465	.765
	Within Groups	5123.675		
	Total	5325.786		

Table 7: Post Hoc tests: Multiple university comparisons

Dependent variable	(I)University	(J)University	Mean difference (I-J)	Std. error	Sig	95% Confidence Interval	
						Lower	Upper
Stress	The first one	The second one	11.432	.543	.214	2.546	0.881

Stress and the academic seniority
As seen in Table 8, there is a significant difference in stress between students in different academic seniorities ($p = 0.023<0.05$). In detail, the 4th year students experienced the most frequency of stress, while the 1st year experienced the least frequency of stress. Hypothesis 3 is supported.

Table 8: Post Hoc tests: Multiple the academic seniority comparisons

Dependent variable	1st year (A)	2nd year (B)	3rd year (C)	4th year (D)	Sig	Post hoc
Stress	25.46	31.45	36.65	40.23	.023*	D>C>B>A

Note. (*) < 0.05

Discussion

The findings of the research expressed a clear picture of student stress in Vietnamese universities. It is concluded that there is a significant linkage between gender, academic seniority and stress in the Vietnamese higher education context. In contrast, the location of the institution did not make an impact on the level of student stress. As this is the first research conducting the relationship between stress and demographic variables in Vietnamese universities, several issues must be discussed in this study.

First, the result indicated that Vietnamese male students experienced more stress than female students. Being recognized as a Confucius country, a Vietnamese man is assigned as a bread-earner, who must earn money for his family. As such, male students must have proficient grades in the bachelor's program, which supports them to find good jobs after graduation. In reverse, a Vietnamese woman is assigned to a housekeeper, who must take care of her children and husband. As such, having good results in the bachelor's program might not be a female's priority. Therefore, the pressure on Vietnamese female students to have good grades is less than male students, which also reduces their stress in the studying environment. Moreover, as Hang (2012) pointed out, the majority of Vietnamese male students have part-time jobs, so it is difficult to have a balance between the job and studying, particularly during exam/assignment time. As such, it causes tension for them if this problem cannot be solved.

Second, the result showed that the 4th year students experienced more stress than younger students, which is in line with prior literature (Tuong & Truong, 2022). It is understandable to explain this issue because the 4th year is the last studying year in Vietnamese universities, so every student has high pressure to do the final dissertation/exam to get the certificate. As a consequence, their pressure is much higher than younger students. The more pressure students have, the more stress they experience. Third, the result highlighted that location insignificant affects the frequency of stress in students. However, this study only selects one university in each region, which is too small to cover the entire region. Further research should collect data from more universities to guarantee the research's representative.

Conclusion, implication and recommendation

This research is successful to open the scope of student stress in Vietnamese universities. Moreover, this is the first study investigating the linkage between stress and demographic variables. While we firmly confirm that stress exists in Vietnamese universities, especially among male and the 4th year students, we suggest some solutions to eliminate this issue. First, MOET should reduce the workloads in current bachelor programs. According to Nguyen et al., (2016), the current Vietnamese bachelor's courses are too heavy for students to study, so a reduction of unnecessary courses (e.g. basic courses, skill courses, or courses not relating to the specified subjects) is necessary. Some of the

students mentioned in the surveys that their program curriculum is so heavy that they feel stressed to complete all courses during each semester. Indeed, MOET has a plan to transform the education program, which aims to reduce the workload. Therefore, it is believed that when the number of courses is reduced, the frequency of student stress will also be decreased.

Second, mental health programs should be adapted in Vietnamese universities. These programs are extremely common in Western educational institutions; however, rare programs have been conducted in the Vietnam context. The important role of the mental health program in reducing stress is confirmed in previous literature (Gerber et al., 2014; Tahara et al., 2021), so we firmly believe that it might have a positive effect on Vietnamese universities.

While this study is expected to open the scope of stress in the Vietnamese educational sector, it still has a few limitations. First, this country only collects data from two universities, which is too modest to represent the entire 224 Vietnamese universities. Thereby, future research should collect data from more universities to increase the generalization of the research. Second, the current sample size of 325 respondents is quite small, and all of them have studied in the business administration program. As such, the effect of student stress in other fields is questionable. Further studies should attempt to cover various educational programs. Third, this study only examines the linkage between stress and demographic variables, so the relationship between stress and other educational factors (e.g. studying results, motivation, leadership) is under question. Further studies should develop the influence of stress on these factors in the Vietnam context.

In conclusion, this is the first study examining the linkage between stress and demographic variables in Vietnamese students. To achieve this objective, we collect data from 325 business administration students in two universities in the Middle and South of Vietnam. The results show that Vietnamese male students experienced more stress than female students. In addition, the 4th-year students had more frequency of stress than younger students. This study expects to open the scope of stress literature and fills the gap on this issue in Vietnamese universities.

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