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RESEARCH ARTICLE

STRESS LEVELS CAUSED BY LEARNING DURING COVID-19 READJUSTMENT IN ADOLESCENTS IN THAILAND AND THE SOLUTION

Natthanun Tawornsatit

King Mongkut's International Demonstration School (KMIDS), Samutprakarn, Thailand.

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought many changes upon society, one of which is the education module from onsite to online or hybrid learning during the initial phase of the pandemic. This change in the educational sector has greatly impacted many adolescents regarding learning styles, so it is predicted that the adolescents' academic stress levels would increase as a result. Additionally, academic stress is found to be one of the major factors which contribute to the adolescent's overall stress levels. Therefore, this survey research aimed to find out whether the education module has an effect on the adolescents' academic stress levels or not, as well as the factors behind individuals' perceived academic stress levels. The results showed that the education module does not affect the perceived academic stress and, regardless of the respondents' present learning module, examination is the main factor of stress among the respondents. Additionally, many respondents preferred the onsite learning module. As regards stress relief methods, it was found that sleeping and listening to music are the top two most selected ways that most respondents.

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Introduction:-

The American Psychological Association (APA) had been surveying people on stress since 2013. From the collected results, it was seen that teens reported higher stress levels as compared to adults. From the 2018 survey, it could be seen that the teens population reported worse mental health, including higher anxiety and depression levels than other age groups.(Divecha, 2020) Since the covid-19 outbreak in 2019, the lives of people all around the world have changed. In order to adapt to the situation, many aspects of our daily lives are changed, and a new normal arises. Many workplaces have adapted by having their employees work online, and some schools also started online learning.(Staff & Lobdell, 2021) In response to the pandemic, the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Public Health in Thailand are regularly updating the measures to be taken. Schools were closed periodically, so students have to constantly undergo readjustment in learning style and learning environment as their schools reopen or close yet again. The most recent decision from the Ministry of Education was to open schools for onsite learning starting from May 17 2022.(Thai PBS World's General Desk, 2022) After a long period of online learning or learning from home, it is believed that some students may find it hard to readjust themselves back to the onsite lifestyle. It is known that changes can lead to stress.(2015) Therefore, this research aims to find out factors related to readjustment in light of COVID-19 and solutions to deal with stress among highschool and university students.

Corresponding Author:- Natthanun Tawornsatit

Address:- King Mongkut's International Demonstration School (KMIDS),
Samutprakarn, Thailand.

Literature Review:-

Stress in Adolescents:

Stress is anything that can cause an individual to experience physical, emotional, or psychological strain.(Scott, 2022) Stress can further be divided into 4 categories: physical stress, psychological stress, psychosocial stress, and psycho-spiritual stress. Physical stress is the strain on the physical body of the individual, such as injury, surgery, dehydration, and substance abuse. Psychological stress is the mental strain on the individual, namely, emotional stress such as frustration, anger, and fear; cognitive stress such as information overload; and perceptual stress such as beliefs. Psychosocial stress is the stress that arises from problems in the social domain, such as relationships, social support, and isolation, for instance. Lastly, psycho-spiritual stress is the stress that develops from issues regarding one's beliefs and values.(Friedman, n.d.)

According to The World Health Organization (WHO), the adolescence period of one's life is defined to be from 10 to 19 years old. Psychologically speaking, it is the time when the individual is between being a dependent child and an independent adult. Therefore, it can be said that this is one of the critical periods in a person's lifetime. Being viewed as an important aspect to help adolescents during this critical period, the education sector has increased in importance over the decades.(The New Leam, 2017) However, it was also found that in recent years, education has begun to take a toll on adolescents' health and well-being. According to a 2018 survey research conducted by The Better Sleep Council, 45% of the respondents reported feeling stressed or extremely stressed. Two biggest sources of stress are both academic stressors, the first being the concern for grades or test scores followed by homework, both reported by over 50% of the respondents.(Josue, 2018) Many prior studies show that academic stress can lead to a decline in mental health, such as the development of depression or anxiety. Furthermore, those with high academic stress are also seen to perform poorly in education.(Bryan young, 2020) According to the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, several notable sources of stress for teens include school demands and frustrations, negative thoughts, problems with friends, taking on too many activities, and having too high expectations.(American Academy of Child and Adolescent, 2019) With regards to academics, examination is said to be one of the most common sources of stress.(ReachOut, n.d.) Most of these more minute stressors are from the bigger stressors that are the expectations and academic demands of parents and teachers.(Smith, 2020) Adolescents can easily feel overwhelmed when they are constantly exposed to such high expectations and demands.

Stress from changed societal norms:

During the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, measures to prevent further spread of the virus were implemented. As a result, educational modules were switched from onsite or in-person learning to online and hybrid learning, which is conducted via the internet and online platforms, limiting individuals' interaction with peers and teachers as a result.(The Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, 2021) However, adolescence is the time period when social skills and a sense of identity develop. With the changes in daily life brought upon by the pandemic, namely the reduced interaction with others in society, issues in the important areas of development such as communication skills may arise.(Volkin, 2020) It was also predicted that social distancing also increases the stress levels in adolescents.(Wang et al., 2022) Additionally, the pandemic situation itself was also found to negatively impact the mental health of many adolescents in Thailand. According to a survey conducted by UNICEF in 2020, it was shown that the mental health of 7 in 10 adolescents in Thailand were greatly impacted by COVID-19 pandemic situation. This decline in mental health was due to concerns regarding the financial well-being of families, their education, and future career. Furthermore, according to the health assessment conducted by Department of Mental Health (DMH) on adolescents in Thailand in the year 2021, it was found that 28% experienced high stress levels, 32% are at risk of depression, and 22% are at risk of suicide.(UNICEF, 2021)

Stress relief methods:

The advised basic steps to be taken to start stress management involves practicing self-awareness, identification of the sources of stress, acceptance, and relaxation. Additionally, activities that can help to relieve stress include exercising, listening to music, and getting quality sleep.(Apiwong, 2021) Exercising can increase the body's endorphins production, a chemical which helps reduce stress.(Cleveland Clinic, 2022; Newport Academy, 2022) It is also advised to go for exercises that the individual enjoys as they will likely continue to perform the said exercise in the long term.(Newport Academy, 2022) Music is another effective stress management method. Research found that music with a tempo around 60 beats per minute can help stimulate the alpha brainwaves, which are the brainwaves present when we are relaxed.(University of Nevada, Reno)Some people might find the sounds of nature such as rain mixed with light jazz or classical music in the background to be effective in reducing stress. However, since music is subjective, the effectiveness of a particular sound or type of music may vary from person to person.

Therefore, it is important to not force yourself to enjoy music that others prefer and explore the genre that you like. Sleeping is also another great way to reduce stress. Sticking to a regular sleeping routine can help calm the body, improve mood and concentration, enabling better judgment and decision-making. Being able to think clearly can help you cope with the stress you are experiencing. On the other hand, not getting enough sleep can cause you to be more emotionally sensitive and impulsive.(SleepScore Labs, 2021) A study showed that individuals who are sleep-deprived are likely to amplify the severity of stressful situations as compared to those individuals who get sufficient sleep.(Newport Academy, 2022)

Methods:-

An 8-questions-questionnaire was used to find out if the changes in learning style caused by the COVID-19 pandemic increases perceived academic stress in adolescents, the learning module preferences of adolescents, and the factors that contribute to the selected learning style preference. The questions in the questionnaire can be divided into 4 sections: personal information including the respondents' age and current educational level, the current learning module (onsite, online, or hybrid) and perceived stress levels with reasons for the selected stress level, the respondents' preferred learning module with reasons for the preferences, and the methods that the respondents usually use to relieve stress. The data was collected from 40 individuals of age from 15 to 19. The data from the questionnaire were then analyzed with IBM SPSS Statistics 28 to find out whether each value significantly influenced the others.

It is important to note that the participants were informed about the research purposes behind the survey and that they voluntarily decided to take part in this process of data collection. Due to the pandemic of COVID-19, this was conducted via online platforms only. Furthermore, all participants were aware of their right to withdraw their information at any time, and that the personal information would be kept confidential; only researchers have access to the data. All participants would appear anonymous in this study and only numerical data is presented.

Results And Discussions:-

Table 1:- Age of Respondents.

Age	Percentage
15	5.0%
16	10.0%
17	30.0%
18	10.0%
19	45.0%

Table 2:- Current Learning Style of Respondents.

Learning Style	Percentage
Online	20.0%
Onsite	62.5%
Hybrid	17.5%

Table 3:- Respondent's Perceived Stress Levels.

Stress Levels	Percentage
No stress	5.0%
Low	10.0%
Moderate	47.5%
High	27.5%
Extremely High	10.0%

All the respondents are adolescents with the lowest age of 15 and highest age of 19, as can be seen from Table 1. Most of the respondents were experiencing the onsite learning module (62.5%) at the time the survey was taken. Only 20.0% of the respondents were experiencing the online learning module, and those that were experiencing the hybrid learning module was the lowest at 17.5%. Of all the respondents, 47.5% were experiencing moderate stress, which was the highest proportion of all the stress levels. The second highest proportion regarding stress level is high stress at 27.5%, followed by those with low stress and extremely high stress, both of which accounted for 10.0% each. The lowest proportion reported no stress at only 5.0%.

Table 4:- Preferred Learning Style.

Learning Style	Percentage
Online	12.5%
Onsite	67.5%
Hybrid	20.0%

Of all the respondents, 67.5% prefer learning onsite. This is almost 50% more than the number of those preferred online and hybrid learning styles at 12.5% and 20.0% of respondents respectively. Thus, the majority of the respondents preferred onsite learning. Additionally, it can also be said that more people preferred hybrid learning over online learning.

Table 5:- Factors of Perceived Stress.

Factors of Stress	Percentage
Quiz or Unit Test	10.4%
Examination	20.1%
Standardized Test	11.9%
University Admission Preparation	11.9%
Being unable to follow the lesson	9.0%
Being inattentive during lessons	9.7%
Increased Workload	9.0%
Being unable to perform experiments in certain subjects	2.2%
Being Isolated	4.5%
Not being able to regularly communicate with teachers	3.7%
Inappropriate Environment for Learning	4.5%

The most reported factor of stress was examination, selected by 20.1% of the respondents. This corresponds to the statement that examination is one of the most common factors of stress in adolescents.(ReachOut, n.d.) The second and third most reported factors of stress were standardized tests and university preparation, both of which were selected by 11.9% of the respondents, making the discrepancy between the first and second and third most reported factors of stress to be 9.2%. All these factors are closely related to grades and career paths. The root cause may be due to the high expectations and academic demands of parents, teachers, and the individuals themselves.(Smith, 2020) On the other hand, the least reported factor of stress was being unable to perform experiments in certain subjects with only 2.2%.

Table 6:- Reasons for Preferred Learning Style: Online.

Reasons	Percentage
Having the fear of COVID-19	5.3%
Being able to learn at one's own pace	5.3%
Having more flexible schedule	5.3%
Having more spare time	21.1%
Being less tired	15.8%
Not having to commute	21.1%
Having more sense of privacy	5.3%
Not having to socialize much	10.5%
Having the sense of comfort staying home	10.5%

Of all the respondents who preferred the online learning module, 21.1% reasoned that they had more spare time and/or that they did not have to commute. Both of these reasons are related to time, so it seems that many people value their time and do not want to waste it on transportation. On the other hand, four of the other reasons were selected by the lowest number of respondents, with only 5.3%, which include having the fear of COVID-19, being able to learn at one's own pace, having a more flexible schedule, and having more sense of privacy.

Table 7:- Reasons for Preferred Learning Style: Onsite.

Reasons	Percentage
Being able to understand more of the lesson	15.8%
Being able to perform experiments and projects	10.1%
Being able to actively participate in class	11.5%
Having less distraction	5.8%
Having a more proper environment for learning	12.9%
Being able to talk or consult with teachers in person	12.9%
Being able to meet up with friends	15.1%
Being able to go out instead of always staying at home	9.4%

Out of all the eight reasons, six of them were picked by over 10% of the respondents who preferred the onsite learning module. The most cited reason was the ability to understand more of the lessons at 15.8%. The second most cited reason was the ability to meet up with friends at 15.1%, which was 0.7% lower than the most selected reason. It could be said that other than valuing academics, social life is as important.

As regards the two reasons that were selected by lower than 10% of the respondents, the lowest proportion mentioned that there was less distraction at only 5.8%, which was 10.0% lower than the highest. It seems that those who chose the onsite learning module did not find conducting lessons at home to be distracting. The other reason was being able to go out instead of always staying at home at 9.4%, barely crossing the 10% line.

Table 8:- Reasons for Preferred Learning Style: Hybrid.

Reasons	Percentage
Having the fear of COVID-19	6.3%
Being able to contribute to projects when required	6.3%
Being able to experience diverse learning styles	8.3%
Having a more flexible schedule	12.5%
Not having to commute when not needed	20.8%
Being less tired	10.4%
Being able to meet up with friends	12.5%
Being able to talk or consult with teachers in person	6.3%
Not having to socialize much	4.2%

As for those who preferred the hybrid learning module, 20.8% reasoned that they did not have to commute when not needed, making this the most selected reason. This was 8.3% more than the second most selected reasons: having a more flexible schedule and being able to meet up with friends, both of which were at 12.5%. Evidently, it seems that many people think that sometimes it is not necessary to learn in-person. The least selected reason was not having to socialize much accounting for only 4.2%, so it is possible that social life is not one of the main topics of concern in this decision-making.

Table 9:- Methods used to Relieve Stress.

Methods	Percentage
Review class materials	3.6%
Further self-study online	1.8%
Do practice questions	1.8%
Group study	3.6%
Sleep	18.6%
Listen to music	19.2%
Journaling	1.8%
Seek counselling	4.2%
Cook or eat	10.2%
Exercise	7.2%
Play games	16.2%
Surf the internet	12.0%

The two methods that most respondents used to relieve stress were listening to music and sleeping with 19.2% and 18.6% respectively. Playing games comes in third with 16.2%. Sleeping can calm the body down to enable a better concentration, judgment, and mood, making it a great stress coping mechanism.(SleepScore Labs, 2021) Music is also found to be effective in dealing with stress as it can help make one feel relaxed.(University of Nevada, Reno) It could be seen that most selected stress relief methods are distractions from the stressor. In contrast, some of the respondents selected activities that involve academics as their stress relief methods, such as further self-study, practice questions, and journaling, all of which at 1.8%. 3.6% of the respondents also selected reviewing class materials and/or group study. Thus, it could be said that most people prefer to do leisure activities over activities that require brain power such as academics-related activities.

Table 10:- Current Stress Levels and Current Learning Style.

			Current Learning Style		
			Online	Onsite	Hybrid
Current Stress Levels	No stress	% within current stress levels	0.0%	100.0%	0.0%
		% within learning style	0.0%	8.0%	0.0%
	Low	% within current stress levels	25.0%	75.0%	0.0%
		% within learning style	12.5%	12.0%	0.0%
	Moderate	% within current stress levels	26.3%	52.6%	21.1%
		% within learning style	62.5%	40.0%	57.1%
	High	% within current stress levels	18.2%	54.5%	27.3%
		% within learning style	25.0%	24.0%	42.9%
	Extremely High	% within current stress levels	0.0%	100.0%	0.0%
		% within learning style	0.0%	16.0%	0.0%

All of those who perceived that they had no stress were experiencing the onsite learning module. At the same time, all of those who deemed that they had extremely high stress levels were also experiencing the onsite learning module. Among those who had low, moderate, and high stress levels, respectively 75.0%, 52.6%, and 54.5% needed to study onsite. The results showed that the learning style does not affect the perceived academic stress levels in adolescents. As regards the online and hybrid learning modules, the responses only ranged from low stress levels to high stress levels. The results also showed that the moderate stress level was selected by the majority of the respondents regardless of their current learning module; 62.5% of online respondents had moderate stress, 40.0% respondents had moderate stress, and 57.1% of hybrid respondents had moderate stress. Additionally, it can also be noted that the stress levels selected by respondents in the middle of the hybrid learning module only ranged from moderate stress to high stress, which is the higher end of the stress spectrum.

Table 11:- Preferred Learning Style and Current Stress Levels towards Learning.

			Current Stress Levels towards learning				
			No Stress	Low	Moderate	High	Extremely High
Preferred Learning Style	Online	% within preferred learning style	0.0%	20.0%	60.0%	20.0%	0.0%
		% within stress	0.0%	25.0%	15.8%	9.1%	0.0%

		levels					
	Onsite	% within preferred learning style	7.4%	7.4%	40.7%	33.3%	11.1%
		% within stress levels	100.0%	50.0%	57.9%	81.8%	75.0%
	Hybrid	% within preferred learning style	0.0%	12.5%	62.5%	12.5%	12.5%
		% within stress levels	0.0%	25.0%	26.3%	9.1%	25.0%

All of the respondents who had no stress preferred the onsite learning module. As for the group who had extremely high stress, 75.0% preferred the onsite learning module while the other 25.0% preferred the hybrid learning module. It could also be seen that exactly half of those who have low stress preferred the onsite learning module, and the majority of those who had moderate and high stress also preferred the onsite learning module (57.9% and 81.8%). This result suggests that the majority of the respondents preferred the onsite learning module regardless of their perceived stress levels.

Conclusions:-

Many changes were brought upon the society due to the recent COVID-19 pandemic outbreak, such as the change in the education system from onsite learning to online or hybrid learning. These changes in the academic sector were thought to negatively affect the academic stress experienced by adolescents. However, the results from this study suggested that this did not hold true. The majority of the respondents had moderate stress levels regardless of whether they were experiencing online, onsite, or hybrid learning. The percentage of those with low to high stress levels who were experiencing the online and onsite learning modules were roughly the same as well. However, it can also be said that those who were experiencing the hybrid learning module were feeling an overall higher level of stress. As regards the learning preference, the majority of the respondents also preferred the onsite learning module with reasons mostly related to a better academic understanding and participation as well as an active social life. In addition, even though those who were experiencing the hybrid learning module were reported to be feeling generally higher levels of stress, more respondents preferred the hybrid learning module over the online learning module. Lastly, the method that is most widely used to relieve stress is sleeping and other activities that do not involve much use of brain power.

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