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## The Effect of family, friends, and others on stress among Vietnamese university students: a survey study

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### Abstract

Social support is an important factor for people to cope with difficult situations. A cross-sectional study, 492 Vietnamese students who were selected using convenient sampling from September 2024 to December 2024. The data were collected using the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS) and Perceived Stress Scale (PSS). The collected data was analyzed using structural equation modeling (SEM) in AMOS 26. Structural equation modeling indicated a significant relationship between Other and stress ( $\beta = -0.012$ ,  $SE = 0.019$ ,  $p = 0.505$ ), Family and stress ( $\beta = -0.032$ ,  $SE = 0.017$ ,  $p = 0.055$ ), and Friend and stress ( $\beta = -0.097$ ,  $SE = 0.022$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). The results indicated that increasing social support could decrease stress. These results have important implications for higher education in promoting university students in Vietnam.

**Keywords:** Family support, Friend support, Social support, Significant other supports.

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**Transparency:** The authors confirm that the manuscript is an honest, accurate, and transparent account of the study; that no vital features of the study have been omitted; and that any discrepancies from the study as planned have been explained. This study followed all ethical practices during writing.

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### 1. Introduction

Studies on college students' mental health problems are increasing due to the significant rise in stress among university students [1]. Stress can lead to negative emotions, such as depression and anxiety [2]. It is often defined as a psychological reaction to environmental threats, with personal experiences and emotions playing a significant role in how individuals perceive and respond to stress [3]. Stress is negatively correlated with low self-esteem, depression, and pessimism, which may lead to suicidal attempts or behaviors [4-7]. Surveys indicate that the stress rate among Vietnamese university students ranges from 15% to 35% [8-10]. The severity of depression varies among individuals even under

identical stress conditions [11, 12]. Thus, this study aimed to determine the relationship between significant others support, family support, friend support and stress

### *1.1. The Component of Social Support and Stress*

Social support is crucial for the well-being of students as it provides emotional reinforcement, promotes health-enhancing behaviors, and facilitates positive relationships [13]. Social interactions represent one of the most rewarding aspects of human relationships [14]. Social support has been linked to multiple facets of health, including emotional, mental, and physical well-being [15]. It serves as a collective structure for assistance, derived from various relationships such as friends, family, and significant others [16]. This assistance can manifest as perceived social support—the sense that help is available—or received social support, which refers to actual assistance provided [17]. In general, higher levels of social support grant access to resources that individuals with lower levels of support may lack when seeking help [16, 18].

In the context of healthcare workers, social support has been found to inversely correlate with stress, anxiety, and burnout, highlighting its protective role in high-stress environments [19]. Friend support, in particular, plays a significant role in mitigating stress, emphasizing the importance of a supportive social environment in academic settings [20]. Emotional support from parents and strong friendships contribute to the development of better coping mechanisms in children, while school support also plays a vital role in stress reduction [21]. Research suggests that perceived social support often has a more substantial impact on reducing stress and improving mental health compared to received support [22]. For instance, men with strong power motives may respond more positively to visible social support, whereas women may be less affected by social support in social-evaluative stress situations [22].

Family support is particularly crucial in mitigating stress across various contexts, including work, academia, and health-related environments. In the banking sector in Bangladesh, family support plays a pivotal role in reducing work-related stress and fostering work-life balance among female employees. Studies indicate that family support inversely correlates with job stress, particularly for married women, allowing them to maintain a healthier professional and personal life [23]. Similarly, among farmers, family support helps alleviate work-related stress caused by factors such as heavy workloads and environmental pressures. However, while family support significantly reduces stress, it does not directly enhance psychological well-being, indicating the necessity of additional coping strategies [24]. In the academic context, family support has been found to significantly reduce stress among high school students in Palopo, Indonesia, with a negative correlation between family support and academic stress, although other factors also contribute to stress levels [25]. Female doctoral students at Pant University reported high levels of family support, which negatively correlated with perceived stress, underscoring the importance of familial support in managing stress and enhancing academic success [26]. Furthermore, in the West Arso District, strong family support was associated with lower stress levels, reinforcing its role in stress management [27].

Friend support is widely recognized as an essential buffer against stress, particularly in academic and high-pressure environments. Studies indicate that while friend support can be highly effective in reducing stress, its impact varies depending on the context and individual differences. A study involving Chinese university students found that friend support was the most significant form of social support in decreasing stress levels, surpassing even family support [20]. This finding suggests that peer relationships are particularly vital during college years, a period when students often lack immediate familial support. Experimental studies have demonstrated that friend support can reduce stress-induced overeating by decreasing negative affect and increasing self-efficacy [28]. Other research indicates that optimism moderates the relationship between friendship stress and psychological distress, although social support itself was not a significant moderator in this context [29]. However, studies on hospitalized and orthopedic patients found no significant correlation between friend support and stress levels, suggesting that the effectiveness of friend support may be limited in certain medical or clinical settings [30, 31].

Social support plays a crucial role in mitigating the effects of stress, acting as a protective buffer against the negative consequences of stressful events. This support can originate from various sources, including family, friends, and even virtual companions, influencing both psychological and physiological responses to stress. For example, perceived support from family and friends has been associated with lower depressive symptoms and improved mental health outcomes, enhancing self-esteem and academic achievement, particularly among students [32]. Additionally, support from significant others has been found to moderate the relationship between acculturative stress and problematic eating behaviors, although the effects vary depending on the type of support and the specific stressor [33]. Emerging research suggests that virtual companions can provide emotional support and reduce stress, particularly when there is congruence between the user's mood and the perceived mood of the virtual companion [34]. However, in some cases, social support can paradoxically increase stress, particularly if it is perceived as evaluative or judgmental. This complexity highlights the need for sensitive and well-tailored support strategies [35]. Given these considerations, this study examines the role of social support in stress regulation. Specifically, this research aims to test a model with the following hypotheses:

*Hypothesis 1: A negative relationship exists between support from significant others and stress.*

*Hypothesis 2: A negative relationship exists between family support and stress.*

*Hypothesis 3: A negative relationship exists between friend support and stress.*

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Participants

This study was conducted on a sample of 492 university students in Vietnam. Among the participants, 100 (20.3%) were male, and 392 (79.7%) were female. Regarding their year of study, 212 (43.1%) were first-year students, 83 (16.9%) were second-year students, 55 (11.2%) were third-year students, 110 (22.4%) were fourth-year students, and 32 (6.5%) were in their fifth year or beyond. In terms of religion, 154 (31.3%) identified as Buddhist, 61 (12.4%) as Catholic, 9 (1.8%) followed other religions, and 268 (54.5%) reported having no religious affiliation. Regarding residence, 172 (35.0%) lived in rural areas, 303 (61.6%) in cities, and 17 (3.5%) in midland, mountainous, or island areas. Concerning relationship status, 315 (64.0%) were single, 125 (25.4%) were in a relationship, and 52 (10.6%) were married. As for their majors, 29 (5.9%) studied natural sciences or engineering, 351 (71.3%) were in social sciences, humanities, or education, 6 (1.2%) were in culture, arts, or sports, and 106 (21.5%) were in other fields (see Table 1)

### 2.2. Procedure Methods

A descriptive cross-sectional study was conducted between September and December 2024, using a convenient sampling method. The city was divided into five zones, including university students from Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City, and other areas. The inclusion criteria consisted of students who were currently enrolled at a university in Vietnam, interested in participating in the study, and capable of understanding and responding to the study questions. Questionnaires were administered via Google Forms. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time and were assured that their information would be kept confidential and handled according to professional ethical guidelines.

**Table 1.**  
Demographics Characteristics.

Variable	N (%)
Gender	
Male	100 (20.3%)
Female	392 (79.7%)
University year	
Freshmen	212 (43.1%)
Sophomores	83 (16.9%)
Juniors	55 (11.2%)
Seniors	110 (22.4%)
Other	32 (6.5%)
Year of birth	
From 2001 onwards	96 (19.5%)
2002	21 (4.3%)
2003	93 (18.9%)
2004	46 (9.3%)
2005	71 (14.4%)
2006	165 (33.5%)
Religion	
Buddhist	154 (31.3%)
Catholic	61 (12.4%)
Other	9 (1.8%)
None	268 (54.5%)
Resident	
Countryside	172 (35.0%)
City	303 (61.6%)
Midlands/Mountains/Islands	17 (3.5%)
Relationship	
Single	315 (64.0%)
In a relationship	125 (25.4%)
Married	52 (10.6%)
Major	
Natural sciences/engineering	29 (5.9%)
Social sciences/humanities/education	351 (71.3%)
Culture/arts/sports	6 (1.2%)
Other	106 (21.5%)

### 2.3. Measurement

#### 2.3.1. Perceived Stress Scale

The Perceived Stress Scale (PSS) was developed by Cohen and Wills [16]. The PSS version Vietnamese was validated by Dao-Tran, et al. [36]. It consists of 10 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 0 (never) to 4 (very

often). Higher scores indicate greater perceived stress. In the present study, Cronbach's alpha and McDonald's omega indicated that the scale was highly reliable (Cronbach's Alpha= 0.90, Omega= 0.89, see Table 2).

#### 2.4. Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS)

To assess Social Support among university students in Vietnam, the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS) developed by Zimet, et al. [37] was used. The MSPSS was translated and validated in the Vietnamese context by Tra and Cuong [38]. The scale consists of 12 items, divided into three factors representing family ("My family tries to help and support me"), friends ("I have friends to share my joys and sorrows with"), and significant others ("I have a special person who cares about my feelings"). Using a 7-point Likert scale, participants rated each item from 1 "Strongly disagree" to 7 "Strongly agree". In the current study, Cronbach's alpha and McDonald's omega indicated that the scale has high reliability (Cronbach's Alpha= 0.78, Omega= 0.77, see Table 2).

#### 2.5. Data analysis

The preliminary analysis involved examining correlations between factors of social support and stress. Data analysis was conducted using SPSS 26.0 and AMOS 26.0 software. First, Cronbach's Alpha and McDonald's Omega were utilized to determine the reliability of the scales. Second, Pearson correlation analysis was applied to explore relationships between variables. Third, a covariance-based structural equation model (CB-SEM) was used to examine the direct effects of significant others support → stress, family support → stress, and friend support → stress. Finally, model fit was evaluated using key indices, including  $\chi^2/df \leq 5$ , CFI > 0.80, TLI > 0.90, GFI > 0.90, PCLOSE > 0.01, and RMSEA < 0.08 [39, 40]. Which indicated a good model fit.

### 3. Result

#### 3.1. Measurement Model Assessment

The measurement model analysis was conducted to test the validity of the construct, including factor loadings, Alpha and Omega reliability. First, the results showed that the factor loadings of the scale items exceed the minimum threshold 0.3 (see Table 2), indicating show that the items of scales were a good validity [41]. Besides, following the recommended of George and Mallery [42] the skewness and kurtosis indices fell within the range from -2 to +2, suggesting that the data followed a normal distribution (see Table 2).

**Table 2.**  
A measurement model analysis.

Measurement model analysis.

Scale	Factor Loadings	Alpha	Omega	Skewness	Kurtosis	Source
Social Support (SS)		0.9	0.89	-0.65	-0.09	Tra and Cuong [38]
SS 1	0.94					
SS 2	0.87					
SS 3	0.80					
SS 4	0.95					
SS 5	0.77					
SS 6	0.67					
SS 7	0.89					
SS 8	0.50					
SS 9	0.82					
SS 10	0.68					
SS 11	0.72					
SS 12	0.73					
Perceived Stress (ST)		0.78	0.77	-0.02	0.78	Dao-Tran, et al. [36]
PS 1	0.74					
PS 2	0.73					
PS 3	0.79					
PS 4	0.48					
PS 5	0.37					
PS 6	0.43					
PS 7	0.50					
PS 8	0.89					

#### 3.2. Correlation

Based on the Table 3, significant others support was positively correlated with family support ( $r = 0.512$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), friend support ( $r = 0.458$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) and had negatively correlated with stress of students ( $r = -0.195$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). Furthermore, the results showed that family support was positively associated with friend support ( $r = 0.463$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) and was negatively correlated with stress ( $r = -0.244$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). Lastly, friend support was negative correlated with stress ( $r = -0.269$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) (see Table 3).

**Table 3.**  
Correlation among variables.

Variables	M	SD	Significant others	Family	Friend	Stress
Others	5.157	1.514	1	0.512**	0.458**	-0.195**
Family	5.269	1.391	-	1	0.463**	-0.244**
Friend	5.001	1.336	-	-	1	-0.269**
Stress	1.893	0.521	-	-	-	1

Note: \*\* $p < 0.01$ .

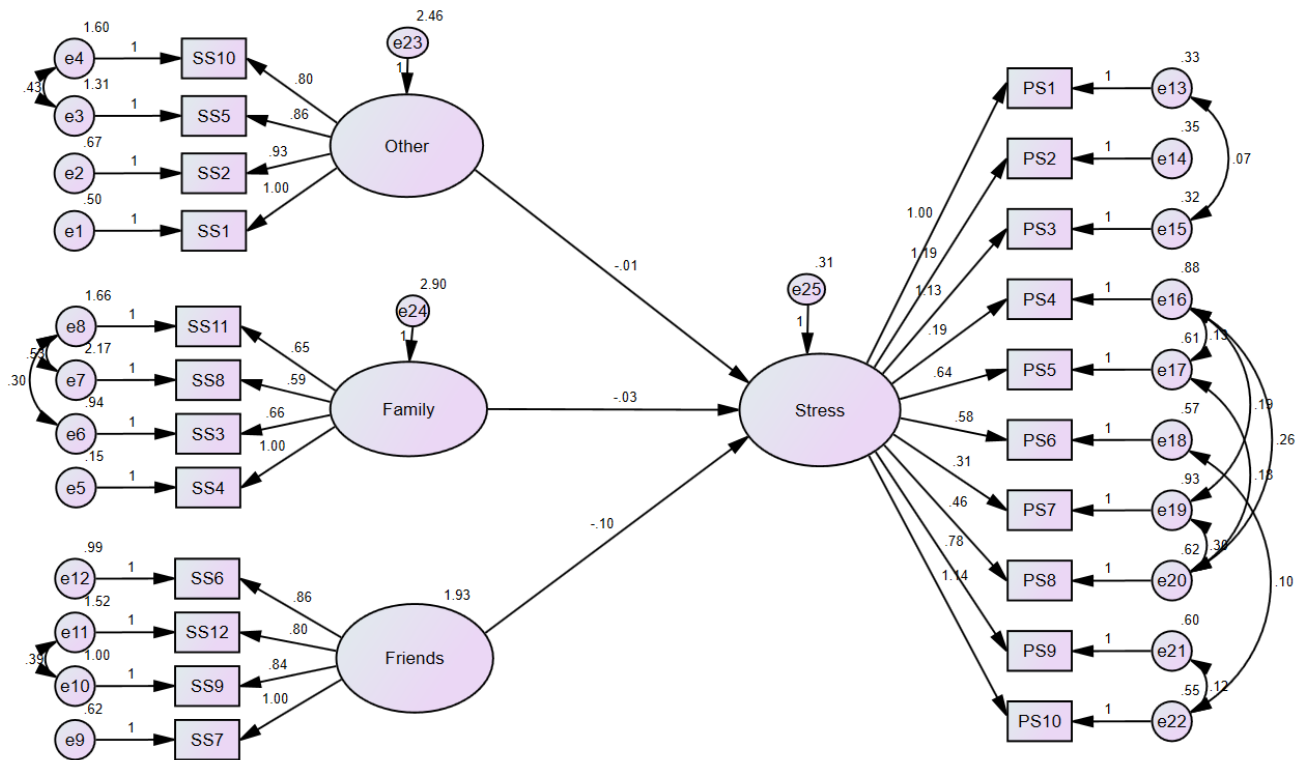
### 3.3. Structural Model of Direct Effects

In this study, to test the hypotheses, we used a covariance-based structural equation model (CB-SEM) with 5,000 bootstrap samples (Bootstrapping method). The result analysis showed that structural equation model was accepted ( $\chi^2/df = 3.689$ ,  $GFI = 0.881$ ,  $CFI = 0.893$ ,  $TLI = 0.872$ ,  $RMSEA = 0.074$ ,  $90\%CI [0.068, 0.080]$ ).

The results of the hypothesis model analysis showed that the direct effect of factor of social support to stress. In Table 4, the result found that the effect of significant others ( $\beta = -0.012$ ,  $SE = 0.019$ ,  $p = 0.505$ ) and family support ( $\beta = -0.032$ ,  $SE = 0.017$ ,  $p = 0.055$ ) on stress were not significant (see Table 4). Surprisingly, the effect of friend support on stress were statistically significant ( $\beta = -0.097$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $SE = 0.022$ ,  $95\%CI [-0.161, -0.042]$ ) (see Table 4).

**Table 4.**  
Result of the structural equations model.

Result of the structural equations model					
Pathways	Estimates	SE	p	95% CI	
				Lower	Upper
Direct effect					
Significant others support → Stress	-0.012	0.019	0.505	-0.068	0.042
Family support → Stress	-0.032	0.017	0.055	-0.086	0.014
Friend support → Stress	-0.097	0.022	<0.001	-0.161	-0.042



**Figure 1.**  
Result of the structural equation model.

## 4. Discussion and Conclusion

Social support is crucial for students' well-being as it provides emotional reinforcement, promotes health-enhancing behaviors Lee, et al. [13] and contributes to the rewarding aspects of human relationships [14]. It also plays a vital role in emotional, mental, and physical well-being [15]. Social support can manifest in two ways: perceived social support, which refers to the belief that help is available, and received social support, which involves actual assistance provided [17].

This study found that friend support plays a significant role in mitigating stress, aligning with previous research emphasizing the importance of a supportive social environment in academic settings [20, 21]. Additionally, friend support

has been shown to have a more substantial impact on reducing stress and improving mental health [22]. Generally, higher levels of social support provide access to resources that individuals with lower levels of support may lack when seeking help [16, 18]. Interestingly, this study found that family support was not significantly associated with stress, which contradicts previous research. However, prior studies indicate that family support inversely correlates with job stress, particularly for married women, helping them maintain a healthier balance between professional and personal life [23]. While family support significantly reduces stress, it does not necessarily enhance psychological well-being Harishoh, et al. [24] or directly impact academic stress Aza, et al. [25] and academic success [26].

Studies suggest that while friend support is highly effective in reducing stress, its impact varies depending on the context and individual differences. Research on Chinese university students found that friend support was the most significant form of social support in reducing stress levels, surpassing even family support [20]. This finding suggests that peer relationships are particularly vital during college years, a period when students often lack immediate familial support. Experimental studies have demonstrated that friend support can reduce stress-induced overeating by alleviating negative emotions and increasing self-efficacy [28]. Additionally, research indicates that optimism moderates the relationship between friendship stress and psychological distress, though social support itself was not found to be a significant moderator in this context [29]. However, studies on hospitalized and orthopedic patients found no significant correlation between friend support and stress levels, suggesting that the effectiveness of friend support may be limited in certain medical or clinical settings [30, 31].

Furthermore, this study indicated that support from significant others was significantly correlated with stress. However, this finding does not align with some previous studies that found significant others to moderate the relationship between acculturative stress and problematic eating behaviors [33]. Other research suggests that virtual companions can provide emotional support and reduce stress, particularly when the user's mood aligns with the perceived mood of the virtual companion [34]. Significant others play a crucial role in enhancing individuals' ability to cope with stress Huang, et al. [43] and protecting against feelings of hopelessness and anxiety [44]. Thus, individuals who receive support from significant others tend to have better mental health and an improved quality of life, both of which contribute to reduced stress levels.

## 5. Implications for Future Research

Social support plays a multifaceted role in influencing stress through interactions among family, friends, and other significant social networks. Family support, characterized by its stability and long-term presence, often serves as a fundamental buffer against stress. In contrast, the support provided by friends and other social connections tends to be more dynamic and situational, offering flexible coping mechanisms during periods of acute stress. These various sources of support interact in complex ways, collectively shaping an individual's overall stress levels and mental health outcomes. While existing research highlights these interconnected pathways, further targeted studies are needed to better understand the specific roles and interactions among family, friends, and other social networks in alleviating stress.

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