

## **Some Solutions for Coping and Raising Awareness about Mental Health when Accessing Information about the Covid-19 Pandemic on Facebook**

<sup>1\*\*</sup>Nguyen Tan Khang, <sup>2</sup>Dang Thi Mai Ly, and <sup>3</sup>Nguyen Hoang Anh Thu

<sup>1,3</sup>University of Social Science and Humanities, Viet Nam National University Ho Chi Minh City, Viet Nam

<sup>2</sup>Ho Chi Minh City University of Economics and Finance - UEF

E-mail: [nguyentankhang@hcmussh.edu.vn](mailto:nguyentankhang@hcmussh.edu.vn)

### **Abstract**

*The study was conducted to explore the general mental health status of students when accessing information about the COVID-19 pandemic on the Facebook social media platform. The main methods used in the research were surveys through questionnaires and document analysis. The quantitative results highlight the mental health issues of students, thereby proposing groups of solutions to help students cope and raise awareness to protect mental health not only during social distancing periods due to the COVID-19 pandemic but also to equip them with knowledge for self-protection in the future.*

**Keywords:** Coping, mental health, social media, solution

### **INTRODUCTION**

In the report "The State of the World's Children 2021: On My Mind: Promoting, Protecting, and Caring for Children's Mental Health" by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), for the first time, there was a warning about the negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the mental health of children and adolescents. According to the report, the COVID-19 pandemic has caused significant concerns for the mental health of an entire generation of children, and adolescents, as well as parents and caregivers. However, the pandemic may only reveal the tip of the iceberg regarding mental health, an issue that has been neglected for too long (UNICEF, 2021).

Vietnam is no exception in the UNICEF report. Vietnam has gone through a total of four COVID-19 pandemic outbreaks. In the earlier outbreaks, the situation was more favorable as students did not have to miss school or engage in too much online learning due to social distancing measures. However, during the fourth outbreak, the situation became more severe, necessitating prolonged social distancing. As a result, students had to participate in online learning for an extended period, leading to increased use of social media.

As of June 2021, according to statistics from NapoleonCat (a social media analytics tool), the total number of Facebook users in Vietnam was about 76 million people, accounting for 70% of the country's population. Facebook continues to lead as the most popular social

network in Vietnam. Given this popularity, it is natural for students to use Facebook and update information from it.

Citing figures on mental health and issues related to the use of Facebook demonstrates that accessing information about the COVID-19 pandemic through this social media platform can impact the mental health of students, whether unintentionally or intentionally.

Mental Health is considered an integral part of the definition of health (WHO, 2001), where mental health is not only the absence of mental disorders but also encompasses a state of well-being, self-confidence in one's abilities, autonomy, competence, and the ability to recognize one's potential (Princeton University, 2014).

To develop measures for mental health care and maintain a healthy, balanced mental state, it is necessary to study the opposite cases, namely poor mental health, including mental illnesses. A state of poor mental health, disordered, and more severe—when the mind becomes sick—is referred to as mental illness.

Health communication includes communication activities among individuals or the public focused on improving the health of individuals and populations. The skills to understand and apply information about health issues are very important for this process and can have a significant impact on health behaviors and health outcomes (Ishikawa, H., & Kiuchi, T., 2010).

There are two interdependent research branches in the field of health communication. The first is the "healthcare delivery" branch. Scholars in healthcare delivery examine how communication affects the provision of healthcare services. The second is the "health enhancement" branch; scholars in health enhancement study the persuasive use of messages and media to promote community health (Kreps, G. L., Bonaguro, E. W., & Query Jr, J. L., 2003).

In this study, information about the COVID-19 pandemic is classified under the "health enhancement" branch, as all information, whether it be general social news or information serving state management purposes, ultimately aims to control and push back the COVID-19 pandemic to ultimately protect and improve the health of the community.

This study aims to summarize the impacts of information about the COVID-19 pandemic on the mental health of students at the University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam National University Ho Chi Minh City. Based on these findings, it proposes solutions to help improve awareness of mental health and how to respond to its negative impacts. With

this significance, the ultimate goal of this research is to contribute to raising awareness among students about their social media usage and protecting their mental health.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted from January 2022 to June 2022 to retrospectively assess the situation of accessing information on Facebook and the level of stress among students during the prolonged social distancing period in Ho Chi Minh City from May 2021 to October 2021.

Research area: The study was conducted at the University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam National University Ho Chi Minh City. The sample size for this study is calculated using the following formula:

$$n = \frac{N}{(1+N*e^2)}$$

In this:

n is the sample size to be calculated;

N is the population size (total population);

e is the desired margin of error [calculated as a percentage from the formula (1 - assumed confidence level)]. With a 95% confidence level, the corresponding margin of error is 5%. Applying the formula, we get  $e = 1 - 95\% = 0.05$ .

According to the statistics provided by the Student Affairs Office for the academic year 2021-2022, the total number of full-time students enrolled in standard programs at the University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam National University Ho Chi Minh City, from the first to the fourth year, is 11,344 students.

Using the above formula for calculating sample size, the minimum sample size required for this study is 386. Based on this, we designed a survey using Google Forms and shared it with students through various channels such as the University's Fanpage, the Fanpages of various academic departments, the Student Union's Fanpage, the Youth League, and via faculty members to distribute to students. The introduction to the survey includes information describing the purpose and content of the research, the representative person, managing organization, participants' right to voluntary participation, and principles for the confidentiality of personal information of participants, particularly including instructions on how to answer each survey question. After nearly 6 months of distributing the survey link, we received 525 responses, of which 506 were valid. This sample size meets the conditions necessary for analyzing the survey results.

Literature search methods involve collecting, synthesizing, and analyzing theoretical perspectives and practical research findings relevant to the topic. Sources include books, specialized journals, scientific reports, research projects, doctoral dissertations, etc., from both domestic and international origins.

This method aims to find perspectives on the impact of information about the COVID-19 pandemic on social media on students' mental health, the scales for measuring factors affecting students' mental health when accessing information about the pandemic on social media. This involves research published in specialized scientific journals both domestically and internationally, successfully defended doctoral theses, published monographs, and proceedings from relevant scientific conferences that have been published.

From this, a theoretical foundation is developed along with a scale to measure the impact of information about the COVID-19 pandemic on social media. Simultaneously, results are analyzed into specific indicators, corresponding to different levels for students to self-assess and analyze the impact of pandemic information on social media on their mental health. Based on these findings, groups of solutions are proposed to help students cope and enhance their awareness of protecting mental health when accessing information on social media, specifically Facebook.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Summarize the mental health status of students**

The results from Table 1 indicate the mental health status during the social distancing phase due to the COVID-19 pandemic of 506 students at the University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam National University Ho Chi Minh City. The majority did not have mental health issues (meaning their mental health levels were normal). Specifically: most students did not have problems with depression, accounting for 61.1%; students with mild to moderate depression made up 11.5%; severe depression was 11.7%, and very severe was 4.3%. Regarding anxiety levels, most students rated their anxiety as normal, meaning they did not experience anxiety issues, with 44.5%; students with mild anxiety were 14.2%; moderate anxiety was 20.2%; severe anxiety was 8.1% and very severe was 13%. For stress levels, the results also showed that most students did not experience stress issues, with 73.3%; students with mild stress levels were 10.1%, moderate was 11.9%, severe was 2.8%, and very severe was 2.0%.

With these results, it can be seen that at a normal level, most students do not experience stress, with a higher proportion (73.3%), followed by depression (61.1%), and finally anxiety

(44.5%). However, at mild and moderate levels, students have a higher incidence of anxiety; specifically, among the total of 506 students, 34.4% have issues with anxiety at mild and moderate levels; followed by 23% with issues related to depression and 22% with stress at mild and moderate levels. For the more alarming levels (severe and very severe), the results similarly show that 21.1% of the students experience severe and very severe anxiety; followed by depression at 16%, and lastly 4.8% with problems related to stress.

This can partly explain why, during the fourth outbreak in Vietnam (starting from the end of April 2021), students have somewhat adapted better at a normal level to mental health issues related to COVID-19. However, the lingering effects of COVID-19 on the general mental health of students, and issues related to anxiety, depression, and stress in particular, need continued attention and research. Understanding the relationships that affect students' mental health holds significant meaning in the prevention and support work for students with mild and moderate levels; it also involves developing solutions to assist students, especially those with severe and very severe mental health issues.

**Table 1. Mental Health Status of Students During the Social Distancing Phase of the COVID-19 Pandemic when Accessing Information on Social Media Facebook**

Level	Depression			Anxiety			Stress		
	Scale	Number	Rate	Scale	Number	Rate	Scale	Number	Rate
Normal	0 - 9	309	61.1	0 - 7	225	44.5	0 – 14	371	73.3
Mild	10 - 13	58	11.5	8 - 9	72	14.2	15 – 18	51	10.1
Moderate	14 - 20	58	11.5	10 - 14	102	20.2	19 – 25	60	11.9
Severe	21 - 27	59	11.7	15 - 19	41	8.1	26 – 33	14	2.8
Very severe	≥28	22	4.3	≥20	66	13.0	≥34	10	2.0
Total		506	100.0		506	100.0		506	100.0

The survey results also indicate predictive models for changes in students' levels of stress, anxiety, and depression as their exposure to information related to the COVID-19 pandemic on Facebook changes. Among these, the model that explains the changes in stress, anxiety, and depression levels of students at the University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam National University Ho Chi Minh City primarily is Model 2 (Open Social Current Events Information Group; State Management Support Information Group). With multiple regression analysis, it can be seen that when both influencing variables are selected for processing, the impacts of the "Open Social Current Events Information Group" and the "State Management Support Information Group" both have statistical significance.

### **Social Media Communication Solutions Group on Facebook**

The research results have shown that a segment of students experienced issues with stress, anxiety, and depression when accessing information about the COVID-19 pandemic during the prolonged social distancing period in 2021. The causes of this situation are not solely due to accessing information but are also influenced by many other factors, among which the impact of COVID-19 information on Facebook cannot be ignored.

To minimize and cope with the impacts of information about the COVID-19 pandemic on Facebook specifically, and social media information in general, students can implement some of the following communication solutions:

Firstly, reduce the time spent on social media like Facebook. Although the study has shown no correlation between the time spent on Facebook and mental health issues among students, reducing time on Facebook will immediately decrease exposure to information circulating online. This solution is derived from the *Hypodermic Needle Theory*, also known as the *Magic Bullet Theory*, which emerged during World War II. This theory suggests that messages from mass media are injected into the minds of the audience without them realizing that they are being controlled by the media in terms of message reception and the impacts that may occur immediately or in the future (Armand Mattelart and Michele Mattelart, 2024). Thus, reducing time spent on Facebook will minimize the control of the message over the reader and limit the effects of those messages.

Secondly, students can use the power of Facebook users. Currently, Facebook users are free to follow, like, express emotions with icons, comment, and even have the right to unsubscribe and delete all the aforementioned rights. If a user dislikes or does not want to follow information from a certain page appearing on Facebook, they can unfollow, unlike,

hide, or delete it on their Facebook timeline. Moreover, Facebook users can utilize the reporting function for posts suspected to be fake news, misinformation, inaccurate information, or content that negatively impacts the community so that Facebook's moderation team can review whether to continue allowing such information to appear or not.

Thirdly, students should equip themselves with skills in evaluating and filtering information for reception. Information on the social network Facebook can be likened to 'spiritual food' and can potentially cause 'information poisoning'. Therefore, equipping oneself with evaluation and information-filtering skills before reception will somewhat reduce the influence of such information. At the same time, when accessing information, one should read the message content carefully and thoroughly. It is necessary to avoid skimming, rushing through, reading quickly, and reading only headlines without reading the entire content, as it may lead to incomplete understanding, misunderstandings, and misconceptions about the information, leading to unnecessary pressure or stress from the received information.

Fourthly, it's important to share information responsibly with the content that has been accessed. Facebook users have the right and often share information they desire on their personal profiles or share with friends via the Messenger app. This action is considered 're-publishing' that information and amplifying the scope of information access to the public. Lack of skills in recognizing true/false information can lead to misconceptions and sharing unverified information, contributing to the spread of tension and unnecessary unrest when receiving information. 'If the information you share is seriously misleading, it can harm the mental and physical health of your siblings, and friends, because they trusted you when they saw you supporting that information' (Faculty of Journalism and Communication, University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Ho Chi Minh City, compiled in 2017, p. 181).

Fifthly, select reputable and credible news sources to follow current events. This is also a skill that students need to equip themselves with to identify and strategize accessing sources of high reliability in the context of information chaos and disorder, especially during the pandemic season in Vietnam. 'Don't trust 100% in a Facebook account with 200,000 likes, because even Facebook doesn't consider this as a criterion of reliability - Facebook sells likes to those who have money and want to buy them. Don't trust 100% in status updates or posts with 10,000 comments. That doesn't necessarily mean that if the writer has the trust of 10,000 people, it means that everything they say is true' (Faculty of Journalism and Communication, University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Ho Chi Minh City, compiled in 2017, p. 178).

The above are proposed solutions aimed at minimizing the impact of information on the social network Facebook on the mental health of students. In summary, besides the support and intervention of family, relatives, friends, and educational institutions, the main factor determining whether one is affected or not depends greatly on the individual student. These solutions can be applied individually or in combination with each other or can be combined with a group of mental health solutions below.

### **Solutions for mental health**

#### **For students**

Regularly and actively participate in seminars, talk shows, and workshops on mental health organized within and outside the school to enhance awareness of mental health, as well as to be more proactive in seeking resources to help overcome psychological difficulties.

Students should build, develop, and maintain positive relationships with teachers, classmates, and faculty members within the department, especially with the student support services.

When facing difficulties related to mental health, students should be more proactive in seeking help from teachers, professional mental health counseling centers at the school, and in society to find the most scientific, effective, and reliable methods and solutions to their problems.

Students need to evaluate, judge, and select reliable and official information related to mental health in general on modern social media platforms and mass media.

#### **For the Youth Union – Student Association of the School and the Faculties/Departments**

There should be regular attention, coordination, direction, and guidance in organizing collective programs and activities related to mental health topics for Youth Union – Associations – Club/Team organizations. This aims to raise students' awareness about mental health, related disorders, and the need for seeking help. Consequently, youth projects can be developed and implemented to help students easily find information and seek professional support when facing mental health issues.

There should be collaboration and coordination with the school's Psychological Counseling Office at the Đinh Tiên Hoàng campus and the Center for Research and Mental Health Support at the Thủ Đức campus to regularly organize counseling and sharing sessions. These sessions should provide free mental health care services to students, allowing them to

seek help and maximize the effectiveness of preventing, addressing, and coping with mental health issues.

Also, there needs to be support for the promotion and widespread dissemination of information to students about the free counseling services available to them.

### **For the Faculties/Departments**

The Dean, as well as the leadership board of the faculty, should direct, closely monitor, coordinate, and guide the affiliated Youth Union – Associations – Clubs in organizing programs and activities that meet student needs, raise awareness, and prevent mental health issues among students.

Each faculty/department should establish a team of staff and lecturers dedicated to school psychological support. There should be at least one club/team/committee responsible for student mental health care to promptly support and assist students when they encounter mental health issues at school.

There should be support for communication efforts and the introduction of lecturers and professionals responsible for counseling and support at the departments providing counseling and mental health care services at the University of Social Sciences and Humanities to students across all cohorts. This aims to help students easily find information about professionals when facing mental health issues.

### **For the departments providing counseling and mental health care services at the University of Social Sciences and Humanities (USSH)**

The USSH Counseling and Psychological Therapy Office at the Đinh Tiên Hoàng campus and the Center for Research and Mental Health Support at the Thủ Đức campus of the University of Social Sciences and Humanities, VNU-HCM, need to intensify efforts in promoting and widely introducing issues related to mental health. They should issue materials and provide mental health care counseling, including enhancing knowledge, identifying symptoms related to mental disorders, and offering effective prevention and coping skills. Additionally, they should guide students on effective support procedures and methods, making it easier for them to access professional and regular mental health care services.

There should be measures to connect the USSH Counseling and Psychological Therapy Office, the Center for Research and Mental Health Support, and other functional departments to ensure coordinated, flexible, and optimal support for students regarding mental health

issues. This will also aid in the implementation of programs and activities for the prevention and care of students' mental health.

In addition, reducing or waiving fees for counseling and mental health care services at the Đinh Tiên Hoàng or Thủ Đức campuses is one way to encourage students to seek professional mental health care services at the school more frequently.

The university should internally issue or publicly release handbooks on implementing mental health care for students, detailing preventive measures, coping strategies, and methods for seeking professional help.

Competitions for designing communication products (posters, video clips, situational plays, etc.) related to promoting knowledge, understanding mental health correctly, and seeking professional, reliable help should be organized by the university. These competitions are aimed at attracting the interest and attention of students and increasing their understanding of mental health issues through the school's communication channels and associated units.

## **CONCLUSION**

The research results showed that among 506 students who voluntarily participated in the stress assessment questionnaire: 73.3% of the students scored within the normal range, and 26.7% scored at levels of stress ranging from mild to very severe. Most of the students experienced mild to moderate stress (21.9%), with only 4.8% experiencing severe to very severe stress.

Based on the research results, we propose and recommend two groups of solutions to help students minimize the negative impacts of COVID-19 information on Facebook on their mental health. To avoid negative effects such as stress, anxiety, and depression, students need to apply one or a combination of the above measures. Additionally, families, friends, relatives, and the school should pay more attention to the mental health care of students, who have already been significantly affected in the digital age.

However, the above solutions and recommendations are only suggestions for reference. When there are signs of mental health instability, students should seek support from centers where experts can provide counseling and therapy using appropriate methods.

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