

Perceived social support as a mediator between coping and stress in first-year students during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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| Keyword : Stress, coping, perceived social support, COVID-19 Pandemic, isel-16 | Abstract The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the education sector and caused stress for first-year students who have to adapt to a period of continence in higher education. Students can deal with stress using coping methods, but the coping mechanisms they choose may not always reduce stress. Coping strategies are not the only way to deal with stress; perceived social support also contribute to students' stress levels. This study aims to determine the role of perceived social support as a mediator between coping and stress in first-year students during the COVID-19 pandemic. Using the cluster random sampling technique, 437 first-year students were selected, comprising 111 men and 326 women, as participants. The instruments for data collection were DASS-21, Brief COPE-28, and ISEL-16. The data were analyzed using the Sobel test technique. The indirect effect results show that perceived social support is a mediator between problem-focused coping (PFC) with stress ($p < 0.001$; $\beta = -0.027$), emotion-focused coping (EFC) with stress ($p < 0.001$; $\beta = -0.020$), and avoidant coping (AVC) with stress ($p < 0.001$; $\beta = 0.035$). Perceived social support has a full mediation effect on the relationship between PFC and stress, the relationship between EFC and stress, and a partial mediation effect on the relationship between AVC and stress. PFC and EFC will not be able to play a significant role in reducing stress levels if there is no perception of social support. This study provides findings that when first-year students use AVC, the environment needs to provide positive social support. Therefore, the role of AVC is reduced and stress levels are reduced. The findings of the mediating role of perceived social support are beneficial because they provide empirical evidence for theoretical and practical implications. | | | |
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INTRODUCTION

Since March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly influenced numerous aspects of life, including health, employment, the economy, society, and education. The rising incidence of cases within the health sector has significantly affected the safety and well-being of healthcare professionals responsible for managing COVID-19 (Kemenkes RI, 2020). In the realm of employment, individuals have encountered termination of employment and have been subjected to layoffs on a national scale (Pusat Penelitian Politik LIPI, 2020). The ramifications for the economic sector include challenges in securing employment and fulfilling everyday necessities (Hanoatubun, 2020). Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, instances of familial discord escalated to violence (Radhitya et al., 2020). In the realm of education, the Ministry of Education and Culture addressed the challenges posed by the pandemic through the implementation of distance learning, subsequently leading to the discontinuation of the National Examination (Pusdatin Kemdikbud RI, 2020). The policy regarding distance learning was implemented to avert the campus from evolving into a new epicenter

for the transmission of the COVID-19 pandemic, prioritizing the health and safety of students, lecturers, and educational personnel (Direktorat Jenderal Pendidikan Tinggi Kemdikbud RI, 2020).

The transition to distance learning and the various adaptations caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has had a substantial psychological impact on students, manifesting as stress, anxiety, and mild depression (Argaheni, 2020; Cao et al., 2020; Hasanah et al., 2020). Additionally, these changes have led to feelings of frustration, confusion, and diminished feelings of self-worth or physical well-being (Dhawan, 2020). Research conducted by Maia and Dias (2020) indicates that during the COVID-19 pandemic, students reported significantly higher levels of anxiety, depression, and stress compared to normal circumstances. The findings from the literature review indicate that the academic stress encountered by students during the COVID-19 pandemic stemmed from the inadequacies of the learning process and the numerous demands placed upon them (Prachintya & Nurcahyo, 2022).

There are differences in stress conditions, specifically between freshmen and advanced students. Augesti et al. (2015) observed that the stress levels experienced by first-year students surpassed those of their final-year counterparts. This pattern was also observed by Salam et al. (2015) who noted that the incidence of stress among first-year students surpassed that of their third-year counterparts. The elevated stress levels observed among junior high school students can be understood as a natural response to adapting to a range of new contexts, including transitioning from high school to college. This transition involves adjusting to different academic standards, new pedagogical approaches, altered academic expectations, evolving peer relationships, and an unfamiliar environment, which collectively contribute to potential psychological, academic, and social pressures (Dixit, 2016; Yikealo & Tareke, 2018). This means that first-level students (new students) have more psychological challenges compared to their senior peers, who have already acclimated to the college environment. Therefore, understanding stress levels among first-year students is essential to provide an initial overview of their challenges.

Based on an initial survey of 71 undergraduate students engaged in distance learning, it was found that students experienced psychological stress (distress) in the following categories: normal (47%), mild (20%), moderate (25%), severe (7%), and very heavy (1%). It was also found that the three main causes of stress were distance learning (26%), learning assignments (21%), and boredom at home (21%). Unmanageable or prolonged stress on students can affect academic, social, physical, and emotional conditions (Pitzer & Skinner, 2016; Rana et al., 2019). Students who experience excessive stress, anxiety, and depression tend to be less involved in interacting in class (Carton & Goodboy, 2015) and have a worse achievements (Gustems-Carnicer et al., 2019). Individuals experiencing elevated stress levels are correlated with diminished self-esteem and overall life satisfaction (Chen et al., 2016) and are inclined to engage in health-risk behaviors (Pelletier et al., 2015; Pitzer & Skinner, 2016). Students who are unable to effectively manage stress experience a significant burden (Ganesan et al., 2018). Therefore, students need to identify and implement effective coping strategies to navigate their stressors.

Coping strategies help people deal with stress in crisis or disaster situations (Kar et al., 2021). The way people deal with situations that can affect physical or psychological well-being (stress) determines the potential

to overcome challenges or face undesirable outcomes (Baqtayan, 2015). People can use three types of coping, including (1) Problem-focused coping (PFC), which focuses on efforts to solve problems; (2) Emotion-focused coping (EFC), where individual efforts to regulate emotions under pressure; and (3) Avoidant Coping (AVC), which focuses on avoiding problems or stopping efforts to achieve goals (Stanisławski, 2019). PFC includes active coping, planning, and seeking informational support; EFC includes positive reframing, acceptance, seeking emotional support, religion, and humor; and AVC includes denial, substance use, behavioral disengagement, venting, self-distraction, and self-blame (Baqtayan, 2015). The impact of the chosen coping strategy can either be beneficial or detrimental.

Coping strategies can be adaptive or maladaptive. Adaptive coping successfully overcomes distress, resulting in long-lasting changes (Sirois & Kitner, 2015), while maladaptive coping firmly predicts distress and is detrimental (Stanisławski, 2019). Based on their impact, PFC and EFC include adaptive coping, while AVC includes maladaptive coping (Altamura et al., 2019). Based on an initial survey conducted on 71 undergraduate students regarding coping strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic, it was found that more students used maladaptive coping (avoidance coping) (71%) compared to adaptive coping (problem-focused coping) (8%) and emotion-focused coping (15%). Adaptive coping strategies used by students are planning, positive thinking, social support, religiosity, humor, et cetera, while maladaptive coping strategies include looking for entertainment, crying, staying up late, et cetera.

The adaptive coping strategies are related to stressful conditions and are psychologically beneficial (Guruprakash et al., 2018). Adaptive coping has the potential to overcome or reduce stress (Dawanti & Koentjoro, 2016; Mesuria et al., 2014), such as problem-solving and positive reappraisal, which are useful in reducing symptoms of depression, anxiety, and overall psychological stress (Gustems-Carnicer & Calderon, 2013). In contrast, maladaptive coping mechanisms, specifically AVC, lead individuals to withdraw from academic activities, potentially exacerbating stress and negatively impacting future academic outcomes (Neveu et al., 2012). The emotional utilization of AVCs may result in heightened health-damaging behaviors (Tavolacci et al., 2013) and increased risk of suicidal ideation (Zhang et al., 2012). Correspondingly, the study conducted by Boke et al. (2019) indicates a correlation between unhealthy coping mechanisms and elevated stress levels.

Coping strategies are not the only way to deal with stress. Perceived social support is also closely associated with students' ability to manage stress (Marhamah & Hamzah, 2016). Dixit (2016) concluded that in the early stages, freshmen seek support to combat stress. Perceived social support effectively reduces academic stress for new students (Baqtayan, 2011; Lyrakos, 2012; Marhamah & Hamzah, 2016). According to Wistarini & Marheni (2019), family social support plays a critical role as a variable in reducing academic stress for new students, while low social support can potentially increase student stress (Marhamah & Hamzah, 2016). Based on an initial survey conducted on 71 undergraduate students regarding perceived social support, 43 students stated that social support was important, even though 68% reported lacking sufficient social support. Based on preliminary data, specifically, students feel a lack of social support from parents (25%), friends (23%), family (12%), lecturers (14%), environment (6%), psychologists (2%), and others (18%).

Previous research shows that the chosen coping strategy does not always effectively reduce stress (Al-Ghabeesh, 2022). Studies of individual differences in the use of reappraisal and suppression, as well as studies of the consequences of both contrasting strategies activated in experimental research, show that reappraisal is more adaptive and healthier than suppression (Dan-Glauser & Gross, 2015; John & Gross, 2004; Mauss & Gross, 2004). However, Troy et al. (2013) stated that the effectiveness of these strategies is not absolute because no psychological process is always wholly effective and adaptive. The success of coping strategies is strongly influenced by the characteristics of the stressor, including severity and timing, as well as the individual's psychosocial and personality traits (Al-Ghabeesh, 2022; McRae et al., 2011). Coping strategies, both PFC and EFC, can control the stressors that come their way. However, people with lower coping flexibility have fewer strategies, so they are less effective in adapting to the needs of specific situations (Cheng & Cheng, 2005).

Previous research found that results regarding the relationship between coping and stress were not always consistent, suggesting that additional variables may mediate this relationship. The findings regarding perceptions of social support as a contributing factor to student stress provide alternative variables for further research. Limited research has examined the role of perceived social support as a mediator between coping and stress in first-year diploma or undergraduate students. According to Müller-Bloch & Kranz (2015), the research gap above is included in the empirical focus because no research has directly addressed this topic empirically. The scientific contribution of this research is the knowledge about the role of perceived social support and the practical implications of the research results. The research hypothesis is that perceived social support mediates the relationship between coping and stress in new students during the COVID-19 pandemic.

METHOD

The present study was mediation research with a cross-sectional design. Data were collected using cluster random sampling, and cluster distribution was based on Pusdatin Kemenristekdikti (2019) statistics including State Universities (PTN), Private University (PTS), State Religious University (PTA-N), Private Religious University (PTA-S), and Official College (PTK). The research subjects comprised 111 men and 326 women aged 17 to 25 years. Table 1 presents demographic data, including gender, age, type of college, level of education, and study program.

Table 1. Participant Demographic Data

| Category | | Frequency (N=437) | Percentage |
|--------------------|----------|-------------------|------------|
| Gender | Male | 111 | 25% |
| | Female | 326 | 75% |
| Age | 17-19 | 313 | 72% |
| | 20-25 | 124 | 28% |
| College | PTN | 123 | 28% |
| | PTS | 178 | 41% |
| | PTK | 25 | 6% |
| | PTA-N | 72 | 16% |
| | PTA-S | 39 | 9% |
| Level of education | Diploma | 50 | 11% |
| | Bachelor | 387 | 89% |
| Study program | Science | 71 | 16% |

| | | |
|--------------|-----|-----|
| Humanities | 362 | 83% |
| Unidentified | 4 | 1% |

This study used an online survey method (Google Form) of three parts, including informed consent, demographic questionnaires, and a research scale. The researchers randomized the campuses that were used as the target sample and then looked for key persons through the social media of student organizations on the target campuses. Following this, the researchers asked the key persons to carry out an online scale distribution to first-year students at the target campus.

The instruments used were the Depression Anxiety Stress Scale (DASS-21), The Brief Coping Orientation of Problem Experience (Brief COPE-28), and the Interpersonal Support Evaluation List Scale (ISEL-16). The three instruments were adapted according to International Test Commission procedures (ITC, 2017). First, the researchers asked for permission from the original instrument developer. After obtaining permission, the researchers carried out a forward translation by two independent translators and then synthesized the results of the forward translation. Next, the researchers carried out a back-translation with two independent translators and then synthesized the back-translation results. English academics review the back-translation results to assess the comparability of language and similarity of interpretability. The next stage was a readability test on a small sample and a large-scale study or field testing to obtain psychometric evidence.

Stress was measured using the DASS-21 adaptation questionnaire (Antony et al., 1998; Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995) consisting of 21 items that assess three domains: depression, anxiety, and stress. According to the official website for the development of DASS, the School of Psychology University of New South Wales (2018), the use of the term “stress” in everyday life is very broad and may combine all three syndromes in DASS. In many cases, all three DASS scales are relevant to the assessment of stress in a broader sense. The following are examples of adapted items in (1) the depression dimension: “Saya merasa hidup saya tidak bermakna”, (2) the anxiety dimension: “Saya mengalami kesulitan bernafas (contoh: nafas terlalu cepat, sesak meski tidak sedang melakukan aktivitas fisik yang berat)”, and (3) the stress dimension “Saya kesulitan untuk rileks”. In this study, the validity of the DASS-21 was $V = 0.60$ to 0.90 and its reliability was $\alpha = 0.796$ to 0.878 , indicating that the DASS-21 was the high to very high category (Guilford, 1965).

Coping strategies were measured using The Brief COPE-28 adaptation questionnaire (Carver, 1997). This questionnaire is a shortened version with 28 items, which generally assesses three types of coping: problem-focused coping, emotion-focused coping, and avoidant coping. The following are examples of adapted items, in (1) the problem-focused coping “Saya mencoba membuat strategi tentang apa yang harus saya lakukan”, (2) the emotion-focused coping “Saya berusaha untuk melihat sesuatu dari sudut pandang yang berbeda, untuk membuatnya terlihat lebih positif”, and (3) the avoidant coping: “Saya menyalahkan diri saya sendiri atas apa yang telah terjadi”. In this study, the validity of the COPE-28 Brief was $V = 0.65$ to 0.90 and its reliability was $\alpha = 0.698$ to 0.727 , indicating that the COPE-28 Brief was in the high category (Guilford, 1965).

Perceived social support were measured using ISEL-16 adaptation questionnaire (Payne et al., 2012). This questionnaire consists of 16 items and assesses a person’s perceived social support. This questionnaire has four domains: appraisal, tangible assets, belonging, and self-esteem. The following are examples of adapted items in (1) the appraisal dimension: “Ketika saya membutuhkan saran tentang bagaimana menyelesaikan masalah pribadi saya, saya tahu siapa yang harus saya hubungi”, (2) the tangible assets dimension: “Jika saya sakit dan memerlukan orang lain (teman, anggota keluarga, atau kenalan) untuk mengantarkan saya ke dokter, saya kesulitan untuk menemukannya”, (3) the belonging dimension: “Jika saya merasa kesepian, ada beberapa orang yang bisa saya ajak bicara”, and (4) the self-esteem dimension: “Kebanyakan teman saya lebih menarik daripada saya”. In this study, the validity of ISEL-16 was $V = 0.70$ to 0.90 and its reliability was $\alpha = 0.493$ to 0.730 , indicating that ISEL-16 was in the moderate to the high category (Guilford, 1965).

Ordinal data was converted into interval data using the Method of Successive Interval/MSI. Then, the data were analyzed using JASP Software (version 0.14.1.0) with four assumption tests performed, including the normality test, linearity test, multicollinearity test, and homoscedasticity test. The analysis technique used was the Sobel test analysis (direct and indirect effects) with the JASP mediation analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the descriptive analysis (Table 2) show descriptions of stress, coping strategies (PFC, EFC, and AVC), and perceived social support in freshman students. In general, students are in the moderate stress category during the COVID-19 pandemic (Mean = 27.226; SD = 14.955). On average, students use PFC (Mean = 15.764; SD = 3.673) and EFC (Mean = 25.819; SD = 4.849) in the very high category, while the use of AVC (Mean = 14.519; SD = 5.209) is in the medium category. The findings also show that students have a high average perceived social support (Mean = 25.547; SD = 7.323).

Table 1. Category Scores From Stress, Coping, and Perceived Social Support

| Variable | Mean | Category | Standard Deviation | Minimum | Maksimum |
|-------------------|--------|-----------|--------------------|---------|----------|
| Stress | 27,226 | Medium | 14,955 | 0 | 68 |
| Coping Strategies | | | | | |
| PFC ^a | 15,764 | Very high | 3,673 | 4 | 21 |
| EFC ^a | 25,819 | Very high | 4,849 | 10 | 35 |
| AVC ^a | 14,519 | Medium | 5,209 | 0 | 35 |
| PSS ^a | 25,547 | High | 7,323 | 4 | 44 |

^aPFC: *Problem-focused Coping*; EFC: *Emotion-focused Coping*; AVC: *Avoidant Coping*; PSS: *Perceived Social Support*

The *t*-test analysis was conducted to examine differences in sociodemographic variables, specifically among age groups (17–19 years vs. 20–25 years), gender (male vs. female), and education level (diploma vs. undergraduate). The *t*-test results indicated that the stress variable exhibited a significant difference between men and women (Mann-Whitney $w = 14255$; $p < 0.001$). In contrast, no significant differences in stress were observed between age groups or educational levels. The findings indicate that individuals who began college at ages 17–19 and those who started at ages 20–25 experienced similar levels of stress during the COVID-19

pandemic, as did those at diploma and undergraduate stages. Table 3 provides a detailed overview of the *t*-test results.

Table 2. Test for Differences in Variables in Sociodemographics

| Variable | Ages | | Gender | | Education | |
|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|-----------|----------|
| | <i>w</i> | <i>p</i> | <i>w</i> | <i>p</i> | <i>w</i> | <i>p</i> |
| Stress | 20660 | 0,292 | 14255 | < 0,001 | 8898 | 0,356 |
| PFC | 17574,5 | 0,124 | 17738 | 0,758 | 10295 | 0,461 |
| EFC | 17261,5 | 0,072 | 18266,5 | 0,880 | 9320 | 0,673 |
| AVC | 20792 | 0,244 | 14488 | 0,002 | 9521 | 0,855 |
| PSS | 19142 | 0,825 | 20677 | 0,025 | 10057 | 0,650 |

The average stress level for first-year students during the COVID-19 pandemic is in the moderate category. A significant difference in stress levels between genders was observed, with men reporting mild stress levels while women reporting moderate stress levels. This finding is supported by research by McLean et al. (2023) that the female group has a higher stress level than the male group. This is inseparable from the natural factor that women are more perceptive and sensitive to what is happening around them. This condition also makes women tend to take everything that happens seriously. In contrast, men sometimes tend to take it easy and show an easygoing attitude in dealing with existing situations (Nindyati, 2020).

The results of the Sobel test analysis (direct effects and indirect effects) with JASP’s mediation analysis show that perceived social support mediates between PFC and stress ($\beta = -0.027$; $p < 0.001$), EFC and stress ($\beta = -0.020$; $p < 0.001$), and AVC with stress ($\beta = 0.035$; $p < 0.001$) (Table 4 and 5). The results of the indirect effects are greater than the direct effects, indicating full mediation (total mediation) in the model.

Table 4. Direct Effects

| | Estimate | Std. Error | z-value | p | 95% Confidence Interval | |
|--------------|----------|------------|---------|--------|-------------------------|-------|
| | | | | | Lower | Upper |
| PFC → Stress | -0.019 | 0.013 | -1.514 | 0.130 | -0.045 | 0.006 |
| EFC → Stress | 0.009 | 0.010 | 0.957 | 0.339 | -0.010 | 0.028 |
| AVC → Stress | 0.054 | 0.008 | 6.631 | < .001 | 0.038 | 0.071 |

Table 5. Indirect Effects

| | Estimate | Std. Error | z-value | p | 95% Confidence Interval | |
|--------------------|----------|------------|---------|--------|-------------------------|--------|
| | | | | | Lower | Upper |
| PFC → PSS → Stress | -0.027 | 0.006 | -4.339 | < .001 | -0.039 | -0.015 |
| EFC → PSS → Stress | -0.020 | 0.005 | -4.382 | < .001 | -0.030 | -0.011 |
| AVC → PSS → Stress | 0.035 | 0.005 | 7.005 | < .001 | 0.025 | 0.045 |

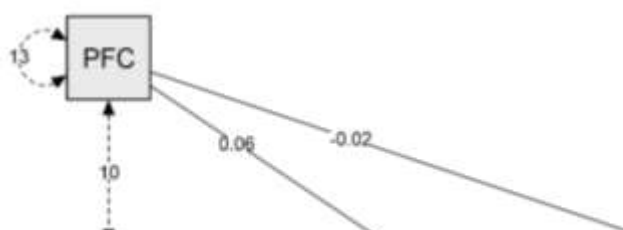


Figure 1. Independent, Dependent, and Mediator Variable Models

The results of this study accept the research hypothesis that perceived social support plays a role in mediating coping and stress in new students during the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, this research found that the relationship between coping and stress was mediated by perceived social support. These findings explain that coping strategies are not directly related to reducing stress; rather, the role is mediated by the individual's perception of social support. The entire mediation role of perceived social support occurs in the relationship between PFC and stress, as well as EFC and stress. In contrast, the partial mediation role of perceived social support occurs in the relationship between AVC and stress. What is most significant to this study, and especially to students, is the need to understand the pathways through which perceived social support can function to provide effective coping with stress and reduce the risk of developing stress.

Coping mechanisms are associated with feelings of social support, which can subsequently influence stress management. Research by Li and Peng (2021) substantiates the initial pathway of coping methods and perceived social support, revealing that the impact of cognitive and behavioral coping on anxiety is mediated by social support. Jun et al.'s (2018) demonstrated the mediation effect of perceived social support among students in the regulation of rage. Conversely, Yu et al. (2020) discovered that reliance on passive coping mechanisms and the lack of a partner for social support can lead to elevated psychological stress during a pandemic.

The perception of social support serves as a full mediator between the prefrontal cortex and stress. In the initial pathway, PFC influences the social support experienced by students, while in the subsequent pathway, the perception of social support impacts the efficacy of stress management. A plausible explanation is that when students endeavor to mitigate stress and perceive a source of social support—whether through knowledge, services, resources, camaraderie, or enhancement of self-esteem—it is beneficial in alleviating stress. Social support can help reduce stress by providing necessary resources, fostering positive emotions,

and improving overall health (Uzuki et al., 2020). This condition allows for coping with stress effectively with adaptive coping such as PFC. Li and Peng's (2021) study supports this, showing that cognitive and behavioral coping positively affects social support in the first path, and social support affects anxiety in the second. In addition to PFC, EFC with stress is mediated by the perception of social support in full mediation.

The connection between EFC and stress is also fully mediated by the perception of support. In the first path of EFC with social support, a possible explanation is that individuals who use EFC (e.g., seeking emotional support, positive framing, or acceptance) benefit from social support. This enables them to manage emotions more effectively. Social support has been shown to be an exciting component connected to emotional control steps, especially emotional exhaustion (Garmendia et al., 2023). In the second path, individuals who can manage emotions due to the role of social support can better manage emotions and cope with stress. Individuals with social support can more effectively handle and replenish the sources required for self-control, specifically in stressful conditions (Pilcher & Bryant, 2016). Self-control is related to emotional regulation, which is critical for managing stress effectively (Hasnayanti & Puspitasari, 2023). Social support thus provides a stress-buffering effect that can reduce stress by increasing the interpretation of adverse events that are less threatening and effective coping strategies (Cohen, 2004). This condition is different from AVC, which is partially mediated by perceptions of social support.

Although partial, perceived social support is significant as it indicates a potential correlation between AVC and stress among first-year college students. The negative consequences of AVC persist regardless of the presence of perceived social support mediation. The mediation of perceived social support in the link between AVC and stress mitigates the adverse effects of AVC. In the initial pathway, one plausible explanation is that individuals employ avoidance coping strategies (e.g., denial, behavioral disengagement, or self-distraction), subsequently receiving social support. This perception of support can inhibit individuals from prolonged self-distraction, prompting them to address stress more effectively. For instance, when an individual exhibits behavioral disengagement in response to a challenge and subsequently recalls the support of their closest associates, prompting them to address stress more effectively. Social neuroscience supports this view, as it explores the influence of real or perceived social presence on individual thoughts, emotions, and behaviors (Di Domenico et al., 2019). Prior research corroborates that the belief in the availability of support can mitigate emotional and physiological reactions to events and alter maladaptive behavioral responses (Wills & Cleary, 1996). Furthermore, it serves as a strategy for effectively managing and replenishing the resources essential for self-control, particularly in stressful circumstances (Pilcher & Bryant, 2016).

Complete mediation suggests that students who perceive social support from their surroundings can ultimately mitigate the stress they encounter by employing PFC and EFC strategies. By analyzing the interplay between coping mechanisms and stress pathways via perceptions of social support, we determined that effective coping can mitigate stress by enhancing perceptions of diverse social support forms, including appraisal, tangible resources, belonging, and esteem-boosting support. This support is crucial for first-year students during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly assistance from close networks such as family, friends, and the university community, as it pertains to elements influencing developmental responsibilities for

students (Hulukati & Djibran, 2018). In particular, parental social support is a crucial element for students, as it can aid in mitigating the adverse effects of stress (Azizah & Ruhaena, 2022).

The perceived social support is inextricably linked to the setting of the COVID-19 pandemic, which underpins our research. Before the COVID-19 epidemic, students were able to engage directly with family, friends, and lecturers; however, the pandemic has disrupted these socio-physical relationships (Williams et al., 2020), necessitating social distancing. Restricted direct interaction subsequently transitions to remote engagement, necessitating increased social support in this context. This conclusion is corroborated by DeLongis & Holtzman (2005) who conducted longitudinal research on individuals in diverse naturally occurring stressful contexts, investigating how the utilization of various coping strategies was influenced by the specific situation, individual personality, and the dynamic interaction of personal and situational factors.

Social support serves a significant protective function, particularly when individuals encounter substantial stresses, shielding them from the adverse effects of elevated stress levels. Individuals with substantial social support are less inclined to perceive a significant stressor as stressful (Sarafino & Smith, 2012). Studies also show that individuals receiving social support exhibit lower stress levels (Baqutayan, 2011; Lyrakos, 2012; Marhamah & Hamzah, 2016). Perceived social support enhances students' professional flexibility (Salim, 2021) and psychological well-being (Abdillah et al., 2021; Adyani et al., 2018; Pertiwi & Utami, 2018). Nevertheless, the absence of social support might lead to elevated stress levels (Marhamah & Hamzah, 2016; Wistarini & Marheni, 2019).

The function of perceived social support as a mediator is inextricably linked to the collective cultural characteristics of Indonesian society, where students often experience social integration (Eva et al., 2020). In collectivist societies, individuals identify themselves as integral to one or more groups (e.g., family, colleagues, tribes, and nations) and prioritize their interconnectedness with fellow group members (Triandis, 2018). Individuals from collectivistic cultures exhibit more dependence on others, enhanced social cohesion, and are more likely to offer social assistance after adversity. Individuals in a collective culture think about needs and motives that reflect acceptance and adjustment to the needs of others (Triandis, 2018). Indonesian people have social capital in the form of a culture of cooperation (Sitohang et al., 2020) and this social practice has long been part of the culture of Indonesian society (Effendi, 2013). This practice of *gotong-royong* (cooperation) is a reflection of a collective culture, including providing social support to community members facing problems (Eva et al., 2020).

The tendency to use AVC, such as self-distraction, is also prevalent among Generation Z students, who are easily distracted by the environment. As the research sample consists of Generation Z (born 1998–2008), a group strongly influenced by technological developments, many are frequent smartphone users (Tapscott, 2009), 84% of Generation Z use smartphones actively, compared to only 2% of Generation X and 14% of Generation Y (Hikmiah, 2019). Generation Z, who often use smartphones to avoid undesirable situations may struggle with coping skills needed to navigate challenging situations (Turner, 2015). While occasional use of AVC can offer psychological respite, allowing individuals to momentarily escape stressful situations, habitual behaviors like smartphone use for avoidance can reflect AVC (Carver et al., 1992). However,

excessive reliance on smartphones also has impacts related to academic and social issues such as academic procrastination (Anggunani & Purwanto, 2018) and phubbing behavior (Karadağ et al., 2016).

First-year students within the academic community are anticipated to demonstrate critical, creative, and inventive thinking in response to contemporary challenges, such as the need for adaptability during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Minister of Research and Technology aspires for all academics and the broader public to possess human literacy skills, which include the ability to communicate, collaborate, think critically, innovate creatively, and demonstrate leadership and teamwork capabilities (Hastini et al., 2020). Persistent reliance on AVC, however, can hinder students' ability to develop these essential competencies. In an academic context, the coping mechanisms employed by students will be insufficient to mitigate the stress associated with academic pressures while they continue to utilize AVC. The research by Paler et al. (2019) indicates that students with robust mental health employ effective coping methods to mitigate stress, including social support, self-motivation, and religious activities. To effectively manage academic stress during the COVID-19 pandemic, students should minimize or eliminate AVC, transition to PFC and EFC, and broaden networks that facilitate social support.

CONCLUSION

This study determined that perceived social support fully mediates the relationships between PFC and stress, as well as EFC and stress, while partially mediating the association between AVC and stress. PFC and EFC will be ineffective in substantially alleviating stress levels without a notion of social support. First-year students utilizing AVC require an atmosphere that offers robust social support to mitigate the reliance on AVC and alleviate stress levels. This study aims to demonstrate the function of perceived social support as a mediator between coping and stress while also broadening studies on social support as a mediating variable. It underscores the necessity for students to cultivate relationships and establish new connections within their environment, ensuring they have individuals to confide in, such as family, college peers, community acquaintances, or mental health professionals. Educational institutions must implement measures to enhance social support during the COVID-19 pandemic or analogous crises, including expert-led education on pandemics or infectious diseases, online counseling services provided by mental health professionals, and stress management training for students during the COVID-19 pandemic. Recommendations for further research encompass the inclusion of supplementary sociodemographic data, such as race and religion, with extra information that bolsters the analysis of social support variables, specifically data regarding those who serve as sources of social support (significant others). Future research may investigate each aspect of social support perception among early-level students.

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