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The Impact of COVID on Academic Stress and Achievement Goal Orientations in College Students



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Introduction

- Students have reported increases in stress (Charles et al., 2021), burnout (Salmela-Aro et al., 2021), difficulty adjusting to online learning formats (Yip, 2020), and negative academic perceptions resulting from COVID, in turn affecting academic persistence (Clabaugh et al., 2021).
- Achievement goal theory outlines different goal orientations available to students in achievement settings (Elliot & Harackiewicz, 1996; Elliot & McGregor, 2001; Pintrich, 2003).
 - *Mastery approach*: to learn and understand content
 - *Mastery avoidance*: to avoid misunderstandings and failing course material
 - *Performance approach*: to show competency and outperform others
 - *Performance avoidance*: to depict competence and avoid performing badly in front of others
- Goal orientations are related to stress perceptions and may be a cause of stress (Vandewalle et al., 2019).

Hypotheses

- We hypothesize that COVID stress would mediate the relationship between achievement goal orientations and perceived academic stress.

Method

Participants & Procedure

- Undergraduates completed a Qualtrics survey ($N = 285$; $M_{age} = 22.94$, $SD = 5.90$)
- 75% female; 9% male; 5% gender nonbinary/nonconforming.
- 51% White/European-American; 26% Hispanic/Latinx; 11% Multiracial/Multiethnic; 5% Black/African-American; 3% Asian/Asian-American; 2% Native American/Indigenous; 0.8% Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander.

Measures

- **Perceived Academic Stress Scale** (Bedewy & Gabriel, 2015): 18 items assess students' perceived academic stress; rated 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). ($\alpha = .64$)
- **COVID-Related Stress Scale** (Taylor et al., 2020): 12 items assess individuals' fears and anxieties related to the COVID pandemic; rated 0 (*not at all worried*) to 5 (*extremely worried*). ($\alpha = .95$)
- **Achievement Goal Questionnaire** (Elliot & McGregor, 2001): 15 items assess the four types of goal orientations; rated 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*), ($\alpha = .83$)

Results

Bivariate correlations

All study variables were positively correlated with each other with the exception of academic stress with mastery approach and academic stress with performance approach (see Table 1).

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics and Bivariate Correlations for Study Variables (N = 283-285).

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	M(SD)
1. Academic Stress	--					3.20 (0.43)
2. COVID Stress	.29**	--				2.74 (0.96)
3. Mastery App	.02	.15*	--			5.35 (1.30)
4. Mastery Avoid	.34**	.28**	.18*	--		5.11 (1.54)
5. Performance App	.22**	.16**	.30**	.07	--	4.24 (1.79)
6. Performance Avoid	.36**	.13*	.25**	.22**	.67**	4.57 (1.53)

Note: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .001$

Mediation analysis

- There was no direct effect between mastery approach and perceived academic stress; therefore, a mediation model was not tested.
- COVID stress fully mediated the relationship between mastery avoidance and perceived academic stress (see Figure 1).
- The relationship between performance avoidance and perceived academic stress was partially mediated by COVID stress (see Figure 2).
- The relationship between performance approach and perceived academic stress was partially mediated by COVID stress (see Figure 3).

Figure 1

Mediation Effect of COVID Stress on Mastery Avoidance and Perceived Academic Stress (N = 281).

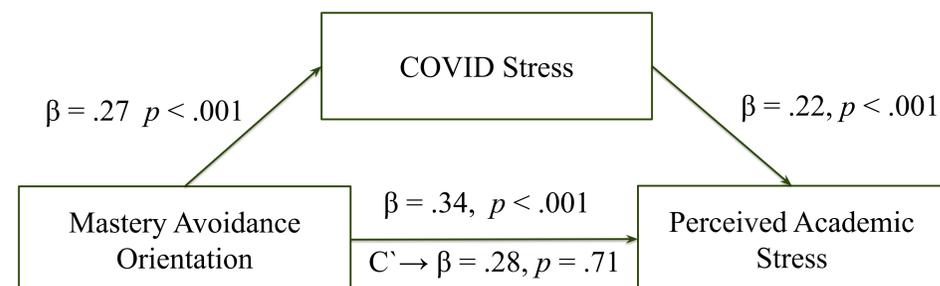


Figure 2

Mediation Effect of COVID Stress on Performance Avoidance and Perceived Academic Stress (N = 282).

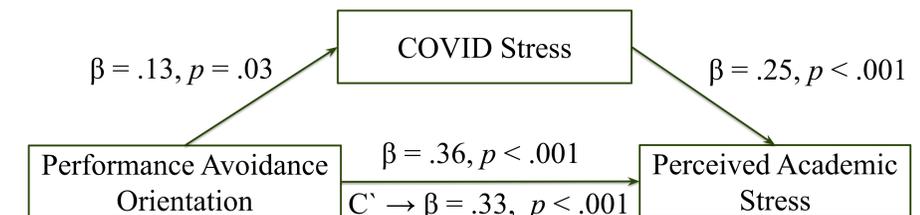
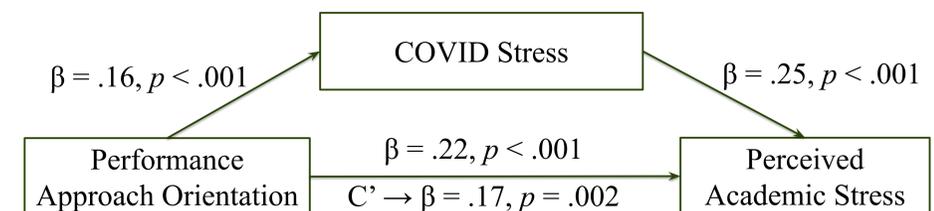


Figure 3

Mediation Effect of COVID Stress on Performance Approach and Perceived Academic Stress (N = 282).



Discussion

- The hypotheses were generally supported.
 - Students who used a mastery avoidance approach tended to have increased academic stress as a result of COVID stress.
 - Students who used a performance avoidance or performance approach tended to show an increase in academic stress, which can partially be explained by COVID stress.
- The pandemic created a lot of uncertainty and stress in many aspects of students' lives, which may have exacerbated existing stressors.
 - Uncertainty may influence goal orientations.
 - Students may be less able to focus on mastery of course content due to adjusting to new online learning environments.
- As a result of the switch to online education, students' interactions and perceptions of peers may have changed, affecting their performance approach and avoidance goals.
 - Feeling more distanced, students may have had decreased opportunities to make peer comparisons.

Limitations & Future directions

- The sample was non-representative, limiting generalizability.
- Future studies should use longitudinal designs to investigate bidirectional effects of COVID stress and student engagement.
- Future studies can investigate relationships as COVID mandates are eased and students return to face-to-face learning.