

The Relationship between Personal Identity Crisis and Psychological Stress among Saigon University Students

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this study was to explore the relationship between personal identity crisis and psychological stress among university students, thereby providing a practical basis for psychological support interventions within the university setting. This quantitative study was conducted on a sample of 352 Saigon University students selected through convenience non-probability sampling. Research data were collected using self-report questionnaires. The survey results indicated that the identity foreclosure status was predominant (accounting for over 50%) compared to other statuses in both the ideological identity and interpersonal identity domains. Conversely, the identity achievement status accounted for a negligible proportion (below 3% in both domains). This suggests that, in terms of both personal ideology and social relationships, students remain significantly influenced by family and peers without having a clearly defined orientation. The survey results also showed that the majority (55.7%) of students experienced psychological stress at various levels, with severe level accounting for 16.2% and extremely severe level accounting for 8.2%. A personal identity crisis had a positive impact on psychological stress among students. These findings suggest that universities need to attend to and implement effective psychological support measures to assist a segment of students in overcoming personal identity crises, thereby contributing to the management of psychological stress among students.

INTRODUCTION

Personal identity crisis – a central concept in Erik Erikson's theory – is characterized by ambiguity and instability regarding values, beliefs, goals, and social roles, emerging when an individual fails to achieve integration and commitment following a period of exploration (McBrayer et al., 2012). This phase often appears in adolescence with questions about self and identity (Alawneh, 2004), marked by active exploration of career, ideology, and relationships (Kroger & Marcia, 2011). University students – a group in the identity formation stage – are at high risk of experiencing "disconnection" and "moratorium," leading to a lack of commitment and prolonged crisis (Crocetti et al., 2015). Consequences of this condition include diminished quality of life and reduced self-satisfaction (Verschuere et al., 2017).

Concurrently, psychological stress among university students is increasingly prevalent. According to Lazarus and Folkman (1984), psychological stress is a particular relationship between the individual and the environment, wherein demands are appraised as exceeding resources and endangering well-being. Students frequently face health issues, academic problems, and a lack of life balance experience (Nguyen et al., 2023). Notably, internal factors related to psychological development processes play a crucial role: a lack of clear self-perception and life purpose impairs the ability to cope with stress (Berman et al., 2020). Research by Deasy et al. (2014) indicates that students struggling to identify personal values and goals exhibit higher anxiety and stress scores. Thus, an identity crisis is not only an independent issue but also a risk factor exacerbating psychological stress among students.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Globally, the relationship between identity crisis and mental health has been extensively investigated, but largely within Western contexts, necessitating further research in Asian cultures – where collectivist factors and family pressure shape this process differently (Schwartz et al., 2014). In Vietnam, existing research presents two significant gaps: first, studies have approached identity crisis (Ha, 2018) or psychological stress (Hung et al, 2026); Thao et al, 2024) separately, without analyzing the interactive mechanism between the two phenomena within the same specific population; second, the application of Marcia's (1980) four-identity-status model to elucidate differences in stress levels has not been systematically conducted. These gaps limit the effectiveness of psychological support interventions, which require context-specific empirical evidence. Therefore, this study, "The Relationship Between Personal Identity Crisis and Psychological Stress Among Saigon University Students," was conducted not only to identify the correlation but also to deeply analyze the influence of each identity status on stress levels, thereby providing a scientific data foundation and proposing timely, effective, and specific psychological support solutions for students.

METHODOLOGY

Research Objectives and Hypotheses

To explore the relationship between personal identity crisis and psychological stress among students at Saigon University. The study focuses on testing the following hypotheses:

- H1: Students' personal identity in both the ideological identity and interpersonal identity domains predominantly falls into the identity foreclosure status.
- H2: The majority of students at Saigon University currently experience psychological stress at various levels, with the proportion of students experiencing severe and extremely severe stress being quite high.
- H3: Ideological identity crisis has a positive impact on psychological stress among students.
- H4: Interpersonal identity crisis has a positive impact on psychological stress among students.

Research Design and Organization

This study employs a descriptive cross-sectional design and is a quantitative study. Data were collected from a research sample of 352 participants using a survey questionnaire developed based on the theoretical framework and previous studies relevant to the topic. The collected data were subsequently processed and analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics version 26.0.

Research Sample

Based on studies with similar content on personal identity crisis and psychological stress, this study used principles of statistical probability and applied the Cochran (1977) formula to determine sample size with 95% confidence level, 5% margin of error, and a characteristic proportion $p = 0.5$. After adjusting for a population of $N = 3,000$ students at Saigon University, the required adjusted sample size was 287 students. To ensure feasibility in data collection and statistical reliability, the study used convenience sampling, surveying participants who were currently enrolled at Saigon University, capable of completing the questionnaire, and who volunteered to participate. A total of 400 survey responses were collected; after screening, 352 valid responses were used for analysis. Data information was recorded, and research results were summarized and reported. Descriptive statistics show the sample characteristics: for gender, there were 103 males (29%) and 249 females (71%); for academic year, there were 55 first-year students (16%), 35 second-year students (10%), 148 third-year students (42%), and 114 fourth-year students (32%).

Data Collection Instruments

Research data were collected via a self-report questionnaire. The main content of the questionnaire comprised 02 scales: Personal Identity and Psychological Stress. These two scales had been adapted and used by researchers in Vietnam with student populations. Before the official survey, the questionnaire was piloted on a small group of students to ensure clarity of the questions. After performing Cronbach's Alpha testing, the questionnaire was finalized to produce the complete survey for official use.

Personal Identity Scale (EOM-EIS-2)

The study used the EOM-EIS-2 personal identity scale by Bennion & Adams (1986), consisting of 64 items measuring two identity domains. The ideological identity domain includes 32 items measuring four aspects: occupation (items 1-8), religion (items 9-16), politics/social views (items 17-24), and lifestyle (items 25-32). The interpersonal identity domain also includes 32 items measuring four aspects: friendship (items 33-40), dating (items 41-48), sex roles (items 49-56), and recreation (items 57-64). Items are measured on a 6-point Likert scale: (1) Strongly Disagree; (2) Disagree; (3) Somewhat Agree; (4) Mostly Agree; (5) Agree; (6) Strongly Agree. The scale scores four status points for ideological identity and four status points for interpersonal identity. This scale has been adapted and used in studies on Vietnamese students by Ha (2021) and Binh (2024).

Psychological Stress Scale (DASS-21)

The study used the stress subscale of the DASS-21 by Antony et al. (1998), consisting of 7 items (items 1, 6, 8, 11, 12, 14, 18). Items are reported on a 4-point Likert scale: (0) Did not apply to me at all; (1) Applied to me to some degree, or some of the time; (2) Applied to me to a considerable degree, or a good part of the time; (3) Applied to me very much, or most of the time. The scale's scoring method is: sum the scores and multiply by 2. The scale's assessment ranges are coded according to Table 1. This subscale has been used in numerous studies by Vietnamese scholars such as Lan (2020), Tuyen (2022), and Thang (2024).

Table 1. Psychological Stress Assessment Ranges

Score	Level	
0 - 14	1	Normal
15 - 18	2	Mild
19 - 25	3	Moderate
26 - 33	4	Severe
≥ 34	5	Extremely Severe

Data Collection

The study used a survey questionnaire method, administered online via social media platforms (Facebook, Messenger, Zalo) using Google Forms, combined with direct paper survey distribution to students. Responses were objective, independent, and unaffected by external influences. Confidentiality and anonymity of respondents were ensured; no personal information, such as names or addresses, was collected. The study confirmed 352 valid responses after screening and proceeded to analyze the collected data. Data were collected from December 2025 to February 2026.

Data Processing

Data were processed using SPSS 26.0 software. The study employed step-by-step analytical methods. Initially, descriptive statistics were used to analyze sample characteristics. This was also used to examine means and standard deviations of observed variables. Next, scale reliability was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha coefficient. Based on collected data, scale reliability was evaluated using two criteria: corrected item-total correlation ≥ 0.3 ;

Cronbach's Alpha value ≥ 0.6 (Hair et al., 2009). Items with Cronbach's Alpha < 0.3 were removed from the scale (Cristobal et al., 2007). Subsequently, Pearson correlation was used to examine the relationship between personal identity crisis and psychological stress variables. To assess the magnitude and statistical significance of the relationship, two criteria were used: correlation coefficient (r) and significance level (sig.) < 0.05 (Field, 2009). Finally, linear regression analysis was performed to determine the influence of personal identity components on students' psychological stress. Indicators such as regression coefficient (Beta), coefficient of determination (R^2), and significance value (Sig.) were used to evaluate the model.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Scale Reliability Testing

Table 2. Reliability Test Results for Ideological Identity and Interpersonal Identity Scale

Domain	Observed Variables	Corrected Item-Total Correlation	Items Excluded (Cronbach's Alpha < 0.30)	Cronbach's Alpha
Ideological Identity	NN1, NN2, NN3, NN4, NN5, NN6, TL3, TL4, TL5, TL6, QD1, QD2, QD3, QD4, QD5, QD6, QD7, LS1, LS2, LS3, LS4, LS5, LS6, LS7, LS8	0.315 – 0.517	NN7 (0.295), NN8 (0.290), TL1 (0.244), TL2 (0.277), TL7 (0.244), TL8 (0.222), QD8 (0.279)	0.850
Interpersonal Identity	TB1, TB2, TB3, TB4, TB5, TB6, TB7, TB8, HH3, HH4, HH5, HH6, HH7, HH8, VT3, VT4, VT5, VT6, VT7, VT8, SO1, SO2, SO3, SO4, SO5, SO6, SO7, SO8	0.329 – 0.544	HH1 (0.196), HH2 (0.267), VT1 (0.211), VT2 (0.285)	0.886
Psychological Stress	ST1, ST2, ST3, ST4, ST5, ST6, ST7	0.541 – 0.693		0.868

Statistics in Table 2 show that the Psychological Stress scale had a total Cronbach's Alpha of 0.868, and all item Cronbach's Alpha values were > 0.30 (ranging from 0.541 to 0.693); therefore, all 07 items were retained for subsequent analyses. For the two identity scales, several items were removed: The Ideological Identity scale initially had 32 items; 25 items were retained, and 07 items were removed; the total Cronbach's Alpha for this scale was 0.850. The

Interpersonal Identity Scale initially had 32 items; after testing, 04 items with low reliability were removed, retaining 28 items; the total Cronbach's Alpha for this scale was 0.886.

Normality Testing of the Dataset

The normality of the dataset was checked to ensure the appropriateness of the analytical methods used. Normality was assessed using the Skewness and Kurtosis indices shown in the following table

Table 3. Normality Test Results for the Scales

	Skewness	Kurtosis
Ideological Identity	0.583	1.132
Interpersonal Identity	0.522	0.604
Psychological Stress	0.338	-0.544

Results in Table 3 indicate that the Skewness values were within the ideal range for concluding normal distribution (values between -1 and 1), and the Kurtosis values were within acceptable ranges for concluding normal distribution (values between -2 and 2). This suggests that the data for the research variables were approximately normally distributed, satisfying the conditions for subsequent statistical analyses, including correlation and simple linear regression.

Students' Personal Identity

Students' personal identity was surveyed in two domains: ideological identity and interpersonal identity. The statistical results are as follows:

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The ideological identity domain comprises four aspects: Occupation, Religion, Politics, and Philosophical Life-Style. Figure 1 shows that among the four identity statuses, 18 students (5.1%) fell into Identity Diffusion; 235 students (66.8%) fell into Identity Foreclosure; 93 students (26.4%) fell into Identity Moratorium; and 6 students (1.7%) fell into Identity Achievement.

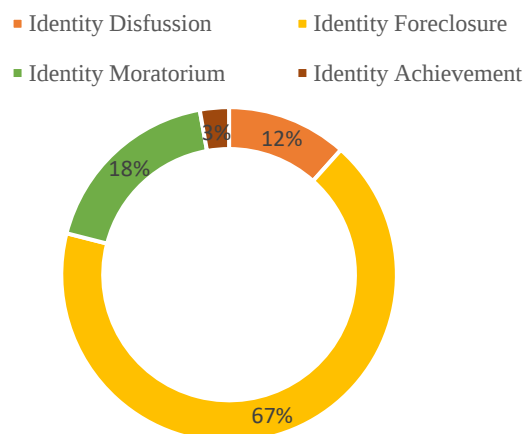


Figure 1. Distribution of Interpersonal Identity Status

The interpersonal identity domain comprises four areas: friendship, dating, sex roles, and recreation and leisure. The distribution of interpersonal identity statuses in the sample, shown in Figure 2, indicates that 41 students (11.6%) fell into Identity Diffusion; 237 students (67.3%) fell into Identity Foreclosure; 64 students (18.2%) fell into Identity Moratorium; and 10 students (2.8%) fell into Identity Achievement.

Data from Figures 1 and 2 show that students' predominant identity status was Identity Foreclosure (exceeding 50% in both Ideological Identity and Interpersonal Identity domains). Regarding exploration level (sum of percentages of Moratorium and Achievement), the Interpersonal Identity domain (28.1%) was higher than the Ideological Identity domain (21%). Regarding commitment level (sum of percentages of Foreclosure and Achievement), the Ideological Identity domain (70.1%) was higher than the Interpersonal Identity domain (68.5%).

Students' Psychological Stress

Students' psychological stress was measured based on 5 levels: (1) Normal, (2) Mild, (3) Moderate, (4) Severe, (5) Extremely Severe. The statistical results from the research sample are as follows:

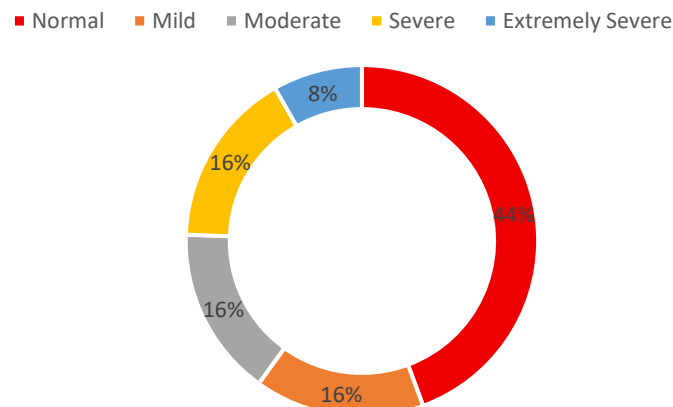


Figure 2. Distribution of Psychological Stress Levels Among Students

Data in Figure 3 indicate that 156 students (44.3%) had stress at a normal level; 55 students (15.6%) at a mild level; 55 students (15.6%) at a moderate level; 57 students (16.2%) at a severe level; and 29 students (8.2%) at an extremely severe level. Thus, the majority of Saigon University students currently experience stress at various levels from mild to extremely severe, with the proportion of students experiencing severe and extremely severe stress being quite high.

Examining the Relationship Between Personal Identity Crisis and Psychological Stress Among Students

Correlation and linear regression analyses were used to determine the relationship and the impact of aspects of personal identity on students' psychological stress.

Table 4. Correlation Between Personal Identity Crisis and Psychological Stress

		Domain		
		1	2	3
1. Psychological Stress	Pearson Correlation	1	0.305**	0.261**
	Sig.		0.000	0.000
	N	352	352	352
2. Ideological Identity	Pearson Correlation	0.305**	1	0.456**
	Sig.	0.000		0.000
	N	352	352	352
3. Interpersonal Identity	Pearson Correlation	0.261**	0.456**	1
	Sig.	0.000	0.000	
	N	352	352	352
<i>Note: Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).</i>				

Results of the Pearson correlation analysis in Table 4 show a positive correlation between personal identity and psychological stress among students ($r = 0.261 - 0.305$, $p < 0.05$). This indicates that changes in personal identity crisis are associated with changes in psychological stress in the same direction (both increase or both decrease).

Table 5. Impact of Personal Identity Crisis on Psychological Stress

	R ²	F Value	β	p
Impact of Ideological Identity Crisis on Psychological Stress	0.093	36.024	0.305	0.000
Impact of Interpersonal Identity Crisis on Psychological Stress	0.068	25.662	0.261	0.000

Results of simple linear regression analysis show that both Ideological Identity and Interpersonal Identity domains have a positive impact on Psychological Stress. The models were statistically significant with $p < 0.005$; the F-value for Ideological Identity was 36.024, and for Interpersonal Identity was 25.662. The R² values indicated that Ideological Identity and Interpersonal Identity explained 9.3% and 6.8% of the variance in Psychological Stress, respectively.

Overall, this study identified the predominant identity status among students in two domains: ideological identity and interpersonal identity. In both domains, the proportion of participants falling into Identity Foreclosure exceeded 50%, thereby confirming hypothesis H1. This result is consistent with studies in East Asian cultural contexts: Putri & Kusumaningrum (2024) reported that 45.6% of Indonesian youth had high to very high levels of

foreclosure, and Xu (2024) reported a rate of 33.3% among Hong Kong students (especially 50% among mainland Chinese students). This similarity can be explained by family influence in collectivist cultures, such as excessive parental control leading to foreclosure (Erikson, 1968; Tizazu et al., 2026), or students in collectivist cultures experiencing greater pressure from family expectations than those in individualistic Western cultures (Peterson & Stewart, 2020). Involuntary career choices lead to a lack of internal exploration (Lee, 2024).

Conversely, several studies report significantly lower foreclosure rates; for example, Verschueren et al. (2017) on a sample of 7,906 individuals found only 15% in Foreclosure, attributed to individualistic Western cultures encouraging autonomy and exploration, where Foreclosure is characterized by accepting others' commitments without self-exploration (Marcia, 1968). Another study by Heshmati & Rahiminejad (2020) on 104 male students recorded only 20.2% Foreclosure, lower than our finding, possibly due to the all-male sample – gender differences in identity status distribution or specific religious cultural contexts affecting exploration and commitment dimensions (Beckert, 2012). Notably, a domestic study by Ha (2018) on 502 Vietnamese youth found the most common status was Moratorium, differing from our finding, potentially due to data collection during the COVID-19 pandemic, where social upheaval disrupted prior commitments, forcing youth to re-explore their identities.

Overall, differences between study results can be partially explained by methodological factors. According to Bennion (1988), differences in measurement instruments (EOM-EIS, EOM-EIS-2, DIDS, ISI), research design (quantitative, qualitative, cross-sectional), sample size, participant characteristics, and identity status classification methods can lead to differences in results across studies. Therefore, when comparing identity status proportions across studies, both cultural context and methodological characteristics must be considered simultaneously.

Our study confirmed hypothesis H2, finding that the majority of Saigon University students exhibited psychological stress ranging from mild to extremely severe, accounting for 55.7% (196 out of 352 students). Notably, the proportion of students with severe and extremely severe stress was quite high at 16.2% and 8.2%, respectively, totaling 24.4%. This figure aligns with the general trend of many domestic and international studies. Specifically, domestically, Thang (2024) reported a rate of 61.7% at the University of Languages and International Studies; Hung et al. (2025) recorded 61.9% at Thai Nguyen University of Medicine and Pharmacy; Ngoãn et al. (2024) found a lower rate (39.3%) at Hanoi Medical University. Internationally, Alonso et al. (2019), Auerbach et al. (2019), and Cuijpers et al. (2019) on 20,842 first-year students across 24 universities in 9 countries showed that 93.7% of students reported at least one level of stress. This similarity may be explained by global structural factors: academic pressure, environmental transition, and financial burden are common cross-national stressors (Auerbach et al., 2016).

Furthermore, students' coping mechanisms for stress often begin with mild to moderate reactions before progressing to more severe levels if timely support is lacking – this explains why mild and moderate stress levels always constitute the largest proportion of stressed students, while the considerably

high proportion of severe and extremely severe levels (24.4%) signals a need for concern, reflecting that many cases have progressed to a point requiring more intensive intervention beyond typical psychological support (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Analysis results showed a positive correlation between identity crisis and psychological stress ($r > 0$, $p < 0.05$), and both ideological and interpersonal identity domains positively impacted psychological stress, thereby confirming hypotheses H3 and H4. The finding of a positive correlation between identity crisis and psychological stress is consistent with the study by Tovarović (2020), in which Moratorium – characterized by crisis and active exploration – had the strongest positive correlations with avoidance responses ($r=0.259$), hyperarousal ($r=0.223$), and intrusion ($r=0.186$). Our results reinforce the argument that the identity crisis process, with its uncertainty, internal conflict, and decision-making pressure, is a significant predictor of increased psychological stress. Regarding the ideological identity domain, the model explained 9.3% of the variance in psychological stress ($R^2=9.3\%$; $F=36.024$; $p<0.005$). The lack of a specific ideology leads to belief conflicts, increasing pressure, and anxiety (Heshmati & Rahiminejad, 2020).

Additionally, financial difficulties and career orientation instability create internal contradictions, causing individuals to continually explore without committing, prolonging the crisis and stress (Binh, 2024). Regarding the interpersonal identity domain, the model explained 6.8% of the variance in psychological stress ($R^2=6.8\%$; $F=25.662$; $p<0.005$). Events such as romantic breakups or relationship conflicts can cause a feeling of self-discontinuity, pushing individuals into identity diffusion and extreme stress (Penner et al., 2019; Wicks et al., 2019). Furthermore, difficulties in establishing intimacy and feelings of loneliness due to social disconnection are associated with diminished self-worth and increased psychological crisis (Schultz & Schultz, 2009).

In summary, our study confirms that identity crisis, particularly in the ideological and relational domains, is associated with psychological stress among students. The results are consistent with theoretical and empirical reviews domestically and internationally, while emphasizing the importance of supporting the identity formation process and caring for students' mental health.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This research successfully confirmed the proposed hypotheses. Specifically, the majority of students fell into the identity foreclosure status in both ideological and relational domains. Most students experienced psychological stress ranging from mild to extremely severe, with the proportion of severe and extremely severe levels being quite high. Furthermore, both ideological identity crisis and interpersonal identity crisis had a positive impact on psychological stress, meaning that higher identity crisis was associated with greater student stress. Based on these findings, the study recommends that universities implement programs to support students in resolving identity crises, particularly within the foreclosure status group, while integrating

identity crisis assessment into the screening and early intervention process for psychological stress.

FURTHER STUDY

The findings of this study are derived from quantitative research results on a relatively small sample (352 participants) selected through convenience non-probability sampling and limited to the context of Saigon University; therefore, the generalizability and scope of application of the results are limited. To obtain more expansive and valuable findings, future research should incorporate other methods, such as qualitative or experimental approaches on larger samples and across broader research settings.

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