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Systematic Review

Variables Linked to Academic Stress Related to the Psychological Well-Being of College Students Inside and Outside the Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract: The present study examines the impact of academic stress on the psychological well-being of college students during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. The purpose of this study is to investigate similarities and differences in both scenarios. As a method, a review of the scientific literature was carried out following the PRISMA methodology. The Scopus and Web of Science databases were used by applying eligibility criteria and multiple filtering stages. Thirty-seven studies were selected for a qualitative content analysis. The results allowed for five groups of variables associated with academic stress to be categorized: (1) adaptation to change; (2) study modality; (3) learning resources; (4) academic–life balance; and (5) socio-emotional variables. The comparative analysis evidenced the exacerbation of academic stress and the comprehensive affectation of psychological well-being during the social restriction measures put in place due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In post-pandemic contexts, responses were mitigated by available social and affective resources. It was concluded that academic stress and its associated variables had more unfavorable consequences on the psychological well-being of college students due to social isolation measures with remote education during the pandemic.

Keywords: academic stress; academic burnout; psychological well-being; college students; pandemic; COVID-19

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1. Introduction

The psychological well-being of college students has become increasingly relevant given the expansion of access to higher education in recent decades. In this context, universities face the challenge of promoting academic activities focused on developing social and professional skills in the face of the need to cultivate enhanced competencies for successful job placement [1]. This increased academic load decreases the ability to address the various challenges faced by students, raising the levels of stress and depression, which negatively affects their academic performance and increases their intentions to suspend their professional preparation processes [2,3]. Students' reactions to the inability to balance the different assumed responsibilities generate physical and emotional health problems that negatively affect their psychological well-being [2–4].

During the COVID-19 pandemic, due to health emergency restrictions, levels of emotional exhaustion, anxiety, and depression increased in college students, leading to dissatisfaction with virtual education and discomfort toward academic activity in general, as indicated by studies conducted in Peru, Egypt, Bangladesh, Qatar, and Ireland [3,5–13]. In addition, pre-pandemic reports in Spain, Australia, and the United Kingdom indicated a

similar influence of academic stress on students' psychological well-being, mainly due to educational activities, workload, and social and family demands [14–17].

Studies in the United States, China, Peru, Egypt, and Bangladesh have indicated that pre-existing mental health conditions were exacerbated by the pandemic, confinement measures, social distancing, and the sudden shift to virtual educational methods, resulting in the separation of students from their social support systems and generating a marked increase in levels of stress, depression, anxiety, hopelessness, and loneliness [18–30].

During the health crisis, several countries implemented mandatory virtual education, which required students to adapt to new learning platforms and methods. According to studies in Poland, Egypt, and the United States, this abrupt change affected students, decreasing their motivation and academic engagement, and causing emotional problems associated with isolation [2,5,6,18,27,28,31]. In addition, subsequent reintegration into face-to-face classes, with security rules and social distancing, led to increased academic stress and adaptation difficulties that affected the well-being of college students in some Asian countries and in Australia, Turkey, Poland, and Ireland [13,20,29,32–36].

In this context, academic stress appears through various emotional, cognitive, and behavioral symptoms, including anxiety, fatigue, concentration difficulties, and concern or apprehension about possible future adverse events related to academic activities [37,38]. On the other hand, psychological well-being refers to an individual's general state of satisfaction and emotional balance, emphasizing the importance of aspects, such as personal development, life purpose, social relationships, and authenticity [39,40].

From this, it is concluded that the period of confinement resulting from the pandemic significantly increased the levels of academic stress in college students due to various destabilizing elements. It is therefore necessary to determine that academic stress during the pandemic had a more detrimental effect than the known consequences of academic stress in non-pandemic contexts. In addition, it is appropriate to examine whether the problems associated with the adaptation to the abrupt shift to fully virtual education at the onset of the pandemic and the subsequent reincorporation into in-person classes after confinement have generated differential negative effects on the well-being of students. Clarifying the nature of these transitions and their potential repercussions would make it possible to identify the specific requirements of college students in the teaching virtualization processes in crisis contexts, as well as the challenges of readapting to face-to-face academic environments after prolonged isolation.

Confinement forced students to adopt new virtual learning practices, such as classes via digital platforms, remote online assessments, the use of virtual libraries, and virtual meetings with peers. These abruptly incorporated approaches involved an adaptive process that may have overwhelmed the resources available to cope with the change in some students, affecting their well-being [6,27]. However, reintegration into face-to-face academic activities meant breaking with these new virtual learning approaches and returning to the college classroom environment. Therefore, it is important to determine whether there are differences in students' current preferences for educational modalities, such as virtual or face-to-face formats, in the post-pandemic context. Evaluating these aspects related to teaching–learning dynamics would make it possible to identify the challenges and requirements of students and to favor their well-being when designing institutional initiatives according to the context.

Although virtual education exhibited a trend toward expansion in various educational institutions before the pandemic, the abrupt transition caused by the health emergency demanded college students, regardless of their previous experience with this format, to employ available resources and skills to adapt to remote learning [1,41,42]. This was especially complex in populations with limited access to technological tools to receive quality virtual education, including such fundamental elements as high-speed Internet connectivity and appropriate computer equipment, availability of suitable study spaces, and even basic digital skills [6,7,42,43]. From a psychoeducational perspective, the frustration generated by the lack of access to technological resources for the development of virtual classes,

coupled with new distance learning dynamics and the environment caused by quarantine measures, could have increased stress levels and negatively affected the well-being of college students [5,11,27,44,45].

It is pertinent to examine the probable differences in the balance between academic activity and the life of college students, both within the context of confinement derived from the COVID-19 pandemic and in subsequent contexts. The intention is to verify whether the stress caused by the abrupt transition to the virtualization of educational activities could have widened the gap between academic load and other relevant spheres of personal development, such as social, family, or recreational, thus affecting student well-being. Studying this balance is particularly interesting considering that, in contexts before forced isolation, college students had already faced challenges that compromised this balance [18,19,34,45].

During the confinement period, some studies reported increases in levels of academic exhaustion, procrastinating behaviors, anxiety, depressive symptomatology, feelings of loneliness, and fear of COVID-19 infection, which are phenomena that were associated with stress in general [21,26,34,46–51]. Similarly, the restrictions on direct social contact harmed the development of social skills, impacting college students' well-being and academic performance [2,8,19,28,29,44,46,52–54].

Consequently, the knowledge gap to fill consists of providing evidence that allows us to determine similarities and variations between academic stress and psychological well-being in two critical moments that have implied disruptive changes for college students: (1) the transition to completely virtual formats due to isolation measures for the COVID-19 pandemic and (2) the context associated with the face-to-face nature of university classes after the restriction measures implemented due to COVID-19. It is key to evaluate these differences because both periods have required intense adaptation processes in relatively close periods. This will make it possible to more precisely establish the impact of the health crisis on students' satisfaction and psychological well-being.

The PEO (participants, exposure, and outcome) format was used for the statement of the review study, which allowed for the selection of the search terms related to the proposed objectives. Considering these elements, we determined the following:

- P: College students;
- E: Variables related to academic stress;
- O: The impact on the psychological well-being of students.

Additionally, we considered including a "Context": the students' academic experiences during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Given the above, the present review study aims to answer the following questions:

What are the variables linked to academic stress related to the psychological well-being of college students during and after the COVID-19 pandemic?

Are there differences in the psychological well-being of college students associated with the academic stress experienced during and after the COVID-19 pandemic?

Therefore, this review study pursues the following two objectives:

1. To identify variables linked to academic stress related to the psychological well-being of college students during and after the COVID-19 pandemic;
2. To verify whether there are differences in the psychological well-being of college students associated with the academic stress experienced during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Synthesizing the evidence on these issues can help illustrate the differences in the effects on the psychological well-being of college students during the pandemic compared to contexts not directly associated with the health crisis. If we find significant differences, we can develop timely and appropriate post-pandemic strategies for this population in higher education institutions. Due to the deep impact of lockdowns and remote emergency education, universities must develop targeted support solutions based on a deep under-

standing of the factors that affect the well-being of their educational communities, which may continue to be relevant after returning to in-person classes.

1.1. Academic Stress

The term stress is described as the changes that occur in an organism following the influence of an element that exceeds the individual's responsiveness, pointing out that these changes are diverse as they depend on the characteristics of the person and their coping capacities [55]. Traditionally, research on stress has been approached from the field of health, establishing links with affective variables such as anxiety to assign it an emotional connotation [56,57]. Likewise, in work contexts, analysis has focused on identifying the stressors that affect performance and productivity [58–60]. In the educational field, research has focused on identifying the sources of academic pressure, such as schedules, assessments, roles, and expectations, as well as students' reactions to these factors, a phenomenon referred to as academic stress [12,61].

Academic stress is defined as a physiological, emotional, cognitive, and behavioral reaction to stimuli and events in the educational environment, whose demands exceed the coping resources of a student and affect their physical and psychological health [37,38]. These responses arise after assessing the limited or scarce coping of the academic environment, producing unpleasant symptoms and coping strategies [37,62].

Potential triggers include a perceived lack of control over outcomes, arbitrariness in assessment systems, excessive demands of the educational situation, and deficits in learning skills in highly demanding environments [13]. Such circumstances may affect functions such as memory, attention, motivation, and emotional well-being, impacting students' health and, ultimately, the fulfillment of academic responsibilities [23,28,63,64].

It is important to distinguish between academic stress and burnout (or academic exhaustion). While academic stress refers to a student's immediate response to the demands and pressures of the educational environment [37,38], academic burnout results from prolonged exposure to chronic stressors in the academic setting characterized by emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and a lack of personal realization [62,64].

Academic stress can also be approached from Lazarus and Folkman's Transactional Theory, which conceives stress as a result of the interrelationship between an individual and the context in which they live [57,65]. This relationship is valued as unequal to the extent that the person perceives that the demands of the environment exceed their resources to cope with them [66]. This assessment can be of a primary order when it involves contents referring to threat, harm/loss, challenge, or benefit; of a secondary order when contrasting the demands and the available resources; and of a tertiary order when subsequently evaluating the levels of coping deployed to capitalize on the experience in future applications [55].

Different authors have proposed various models of academic stress based on how individuals respond to their environment. They view academic stress as a subjective and adaptive process depending on a person's perception of situations in an educational context. When the demands of these situations exceed a person's coping strategies, they are viewed as stressors [37,38].

1.2. Psychological Well-Being

The study of psychological well-being has its roots in the philosophical traditions of ancient Greece, where the cultivation of human potential and the pursuit of happiness were emphasized as the ultimate goals of existence. However, in the mid-twentieth century, the field of psychology began to direct research efforts toward an empirical approach to this topic. During the 1950s and 1960s, a perspective centered on the absence of discomfort predominated, especially from a clinical perspective [40]. In the 1980s, Diener coined the term "Subjective Well-being" to refer to individuals' emotional and cognitive evaluations of their lives [67]. In parallel, Ryff (1989) developed an influential multidimensional model of psychological well-being to expose the factors that determine it [39].

Regarding its conceptual development, the generalized use of the term in research has led to an inadequate understanding of its definition, generating confusion with other constructs such as self-concept, mental health, happiness, satisfaction, and quality of life, which represent differentiated concepts according to the specialized literature. Likewise, Carol Ryff points out that both positive and negative feelings and emotions are independent of psychological well-being [39], i.e., for the author, a person can experience satisfaction in their psychological well-being while manifesting negative emotions. This leads to a more accurate conception of the nature of this construct.

In terms of its operational definition, psychological well-being refers to an individual's overall satisfaction and emotional balance, emphasizing personal development, life purpose, social relationships, and authenticity [39,40]. This definition is proposed by Carol Ryff and is based on a multidimensional conceptualization of psychological well-being. It considers that each dimension requires achieving differentiated goals for individuals to reach optimal development [39,40]. This model emphasizes the connection between the cognitive appraisals made by individuals while working towards their goals and the impact of goal-oriented behaviors. According to this perspective, people with good well-being set achievable goals, which enables them to experience satisfaction.

Ryff defines psychological well-being as the result of effectively coping with stress and discomfort [39]. Individuals with high scores in psychological well-being are better prepared to handle life's challenges. This operational definition emphasizes that psychological well-being is a dynamic process involving adaptation and personal growth in response to environmental demands rather than simply the absence of discomfort or the presence of positive emotions.

Several theoretical models attempt to explain the construct of psychological well-being. Ed Diener argues that individuals achieve adequate levels of well-being when they achieve their goals and satisfy basic life needs. Thus, the possibility of covering requirements such as emotional management would facilitate a person's access to well-being in the different areas of their development [67]. Ryan and Deci argue that human beings have fundamental universal needs, including relationships, competence, and autonomy [68]. These, when met progressively, would lead to higher levels of well-being. The central premise indicates that the efficient fulfillment of intrinsic needs, such as autonomy and personal growth, increases the likelihood of achieving adequate psychological well-being. In this line, individuals who achieve their internal goals, while experiencing personal improvement, would reach higher happiness levels.

The most widespread theoretical model is the one proposed by Carol Ryff, who proposed a multidimensional conceptualization of psychological well-being. In such a model, the interrelationship between the cognitive appraisals made by a person while pursuing goals and the influence of goal-focused behaviors is emphasized. In other words, from this perspective, human beings with adequate levels of well-being set accessible goals that allow them to obtain satisfaction.

2. Materials and Methods

This study is a comprehensive and organized review of the scientific literature that combines the most reliable data on a given research topic. This type of study performs an exhaustive analysis of research articles published in different sources using a rigorous implementation procedure that effectively minimizes biases when selecting these research works [69,70]. The data selection procedure followed the "Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses" (PRISMA) model, which involved identifying, filtering, and including the most accurate, relevant, and reliable information from multiple scientific publication sources [71], specifically those based on the PRISMA-ScR extension for exploratory systematic review studies without meta-analysis.

A detailed explanation of the method devised in this analysis, emphasizing its various stages, is presented below.

2.1. Eligibility Criteria

Research published in scientific journals and conference proceedings were considered for this review study. Regarding the types of documents, we considered articles, conference papers, and proceeding papers after rigorously filtering them during the Identification phase of the PRISMA method.

The decision to include only articles, conference papers, and proceeding papers was based on the need to analyze primary empirical research that directly examined the relationship between academic stress and psychological well-being in college students. These documents are most likely to contain original data and findings relevant to the study objectives. On the other hand, review studies, notes, editorials, letters, press documents, protocols, and abstracts were excluded because they typically do not contain primary data or may not have undergone the same level of peer review as published articles and conference papers. By focusing on primary empirical research, this review aims to synthesize the most relevant and reliable evidence on the topic, ensuring the inclusion of studies that directly address the research question and contribute to a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between academic stress and psychological well-being in college students inside and outside the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Additionally, articles published between 2020 and 2023 were included given the condition and objective of the study to compare the results during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. To define the criterion "during the pandemic", we considered studies carried out on samples of college students who continued their studies during periods of confinement or faced mobility limitations due to restrictions decreed by the authorities of each country as a consequence of the health emergency. Likewise, research carried out during the stages of reactivation of face-to-face education was also included. The research studies needed to explicitly state in their methodology how they gathered students' perceptions and put them into the context of the pandemic, considering the shift to virtual education due to lockdown measures and the return to physical classrooms after such restrictions were lifted. Regarding the criterion "after the pandemic", studies developed in the normalization context of face-to-face classes were considered after implementing the restriction measures due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Based on these criteria, studies that did not make explicit in their data collection procedure the considerations mentioned above were excluded, i.e., those that did not specify the context in which the research was carried out regarding the stages of the pandemic and the educational modalities adopted in each one of them.

Other inclusion criteria were that the studies had to be published in English or Spanish, be open access, and have a final publication status. The evaluation criteria did not include discrimination based on the author, subject area, journal, country, sponsor, or affiliation.

2.2. Information Sources

The multidisciplinary database platforms Scopus and Web of Science (WoS) of the Elsevier and Clarivate organizations, respectively, were used to identify the scientific documents. Both platforms were chosen because they are the largest databases of abstracts and peer-reviewed literature with intelligent tools to control, analyze, and visualize academic research published in various journals, conference proceedings, books, and others. Furthermore, Scopus and WoS index various mainstream journals, so the scientific community recognizes their reliability in presenting results. The last search in each database was conducted on 6 October 2023, ensuring the information selected is as up-to-date as possible for the present review study.

The decision to use the Scopus and WoS databases as information sources for this systematic review is based on their extensive coverage of high-impact scientific publications across various disciplines, including those related to this study's subject matter, such as psychology, education, and social sciences. These databases apply strict quality criteria for journal indexing, ensuring the inclusion of relevant research that has been rigorously peer-reviewed. Furthermore, as two databases that present indexes of scientific publications, they provide researchers with a series of bibliometric data that allow for rapid and adequate

filtering and collection of data for systematic reviews, which other sources do not possess. Therefore, the use of both information sources is considered sufficient and appropriate for the objectives of this systematic review, guaranteeing the identification of the most relevant and high-impact studies that address the relationship between academic stress and psychological well-being in college students during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

2.3. Search Strategy

For a strategic search, a group of terms synonymous or associated with the keywords was selected based on the PEO format (Table 1). These terms were located in the "Health Sciences Descriptors" (DeCS) and "Medical Subject Headings" (MeSH) thesauruses. Likewise, associated terms were found among the keywords suggested in the Scopus search filters.

Table 1. The terms associated with the study keywords based on the PEO format.

Participants	Exposure	Outcome
college students	academic stress	psychological well-being
university students	academic burnout	subjective well-being
higher-level students	academic exhaustion	emotional well-being
third-level students	academic fatigue	affective well-being
third-level education	academic attrition	life satisfaction
higher education		happiness
tertiary education		quality of life
post-secondary education		wellness [1]
		welfare [1]
		comfort [1]

[1] These words were considered as terms similar to "well-being".

With the selected terms, various search equations were developed through a trial-and-error strategy to choose the documents most consistent with the objective of the systematic review.

For this purpose, the Boolean operators "AND" and "OR" were used to intercept and join terms or groups of elaborate chains. Likewise, the truncator asterisk (*) was used to complete terms with the same roots but different suffixes. Furthermore, quotation marks ("") were used as a reserved symbol to join various words corresponding to a single variable. Finally, the rules of logical elaboration of equations were followed with the use of parentheses and the elimination of common terms in various variables composed of two or more words.

After several attempts, we decided to simplify the search string to the most basic terms of each variable, excluding complementary words in the compound terms, to cover the greatest number of documents with the central topic of the review, avoiding the use of operators of unnecessary truncation and proximity operators. Under these criteria, we finally decided on the search strings shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Search strings for each keyword.

Keyword	Search String [1]
Psychological well-being	(Well-being OR Wellness OR Welfare OR Comfort)
Academic stress	(Stress OR Burnout OR Exhaustion OR Wear OR Fatigue OR Attrition)
College students	((Education AND (Higher OR Tertiary OR Third-level OR Post-secondary)) OR University OR College)

[1] Search string chosen after selection based on trial and error.

As seen in Table 2, in each search string, terms such as "psychological", "academic", and "students" were deleted, as well as their synonyms and similar terms. These terms

were excluded because, in the initial search, several studies did not consider them in their titles and keywords, being tacit in many cases. Likewise, some studies did not include the population in the titles, with these being included in the abstract or the keywords. Due to these observations, a search strategy was chosen through "field" or "row" for both Scopus and WoS using the "advanced query" and "advanced search" options, respectively. Thus, the algorithm was divided into two strings, one for each field or search row, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Search string for each field or row based on source type.

Source	Field or Row	Search String	Operator
Scopus	Article title	((Well-being OR Wellness OR Welfare OR Comfort) AND (Stress OR Burnout OR Exhaustion OR Wear OR Fatigue OR Attrition))	AND
	Article title, abstract, keywords	((Education AND (Higher OR Tertiary OR Third-level OR Post-secondary)) OR University OR College)	
WoS	Title	((Well-being OR Wellness OR Welfare OR Comfort) AND (Stress OR Burnout OR Exhaustion OR Wear OR Fatigue OR Attrition))	AND
	Topic *	((Education AND (Higher OR Tertiary OR Third-level OR Post-secondary)) OR University OR College)	

* Topic = searches title, abstract, and author keywords.

Based on the predetermined eligibility criteria, a filter was first performed using the advanced search options of Scopus and WoS. This precision in the search considered the criteria "publication year" (from 2020 to 2023), "documents type" (article, conference paper, and proceeding paper), "publication stage" (final), "source type" (journal and conference proceeding), "language" (English and Spanish), and "open access" (all open access).

2.4. Selection Process

The study selection process was carried out under the three phases recommended in the PRISMA 2020 flow diagram [71]: (1) Identification, (2) Screening, and (3) Included.

In the Identification phase, duplicate records were located and removed after compiling the metadata in a spreadsheet. Likewise, records that did not present an abstract were excluded because it was necessary to know key information for the inclusion of records in the next phase, such as the population, dates of data collection, and the context of the studies. Two authors carried out this first phase.

The Screening phase was conducted in three stages. In the first one, a blind evaluation of the studies was carried out to analyze the abstracts to determine whether the chosen studies addressed the subject matter and objective of the present study. For this purpose, peer groups were formed among the authors, who examined these criteria individually. Subsequently, the evaluations of the members of each group were contrasted and, after discussing the discrepancies in the individual ratings, the inclusion or exclusion of the analyzed documents was defined.

In the second stage, the full texts of the documents were obtained through three means: (1) the websites of the publishing houses and journals; (2) institutional access to the sources provided by the Universidad Privada del Norte and the Universidad César Vallejo; and (3) the website of the collaborative social network ResearchGate.

After that, the third stage, which involved reviewing the eligibility of the retrieved studies, was conducted. This stage included a full-text content analysis, where the documents were evaluated through a new blind review to determine the suitability of the research. The initial groups of reviewers were reassembled, and the documents were evaluated using eight eligibility criteria. For a standard evaluation, a guiding question was determined for each eligibility criterion as follows:

1. Study objective: Is the purpose of the study in line with the objective of the systematic review?

2. Study design: Does the applied research design allow for the purpose of the systematic review to be achieved?
3. Population: Does the unit of information or sample correspond to college students?
4. Instruments: Do the instruments measure academic stress and psychological well-being?
5. Data analysis: Do the results present useful statistics for the systematic review?
6. Conclusion: Do the conclusions denote any relationship with the purpose of the systematic review?
7. Academic stress: Is the study analyzing the factors associated with academic stress?
8. Psychological well-being: Does the research address outcomes in psychological well-being during or after the pandemic?

To ensure quality in the eligibility phase, each paper was evaluated by two authors. The rating options for each eligibility criterion were yes, no, and probably. In addition, a paper was considered for exclusion if it obtained three or more negative ratings on the criteria evaluated. However, negative ratings on items 3 or 8 were designated as determining the direct exclusion of the document, as these were the key criteria for the study.

After the individual evaluation, the authors contrasted their results and determined the exclusion or inclusion of the documents that did not coincide. Doubts (probably) did not imply the exclusion of the document unless there was deliberation among the experts.

Finally, the Included phase was carried out, where the total number of included reports that passed every phase of the study selection process was recorded. Likewise, key data to answer the research questions were extracted. No other studies were included outside this process.

2.5. Data Collection Process

The data collection process began with the metadata export of each record found (full records) in Scopus and WoS. For data organization, the full records were downloaded in Comma Separated Values (CSV) format in Scopus and Excel format in WoS. Then, the extracted data were compiled and arranged in a record sheet, which helped to carry out the study selection process suggested in the PRISMA 2020 flow diagram.

It should be noted that the bibliometric data considered to examine the characteristics of the studies included author, title, year, source title, abstract, author keywords, publisher, language, document type, and DOI.

After completing the study selection process, we addressed the research questions with data collection. To this end, a group of documents was assigned to each author for detailed reading and critical analysis, and they were tasked with identifying and retrieving the most relevant information. The data retrieved from the studies were previously determined to present evidence synthesis. Finally, the data retrieved were arranged on the same record sheet for subsequent analysis.

2.6. Data Items

After thoroughly reviewing each document, the data were collected to address the research questions and prepare this report. For this purpose, the following list was defined:

1. Concept of academic stress;
2. Concept of psychological well-being;
3. Theoretical model of academic stress;
4. Theoretical model of psychological well-being;
5. Context of study (during or after the COVID-19 pandemic);
6. Country where research was conducted;
7. Main conclusion of study (related to association between academic stress and psychological well-being);
8. Variables linked to academic stress (other variables similar to academic stress or that accompanied it to verify result in psychological well-being);
9. Results on academic stress of college students;
10. Findings regarding psychological well-being of college students.

In this way, each study was examined, and some publications that did not contain all of the required information were identified. Data extraction focused exclusively on the information of the studies without making interpretations that could bias the reported findings.

2.7. Synthesis Methods

To analyze the data and answer the research questions, a qualitative synthesis approach, specifically a thematic analysis, was used to identify, organize, and interpret patterns in the data extracted from the primary studies. The thematic analysis process was conducted in several stages.

Firstly, the studies were divided based on when they were conducted: 21 were conducted during the pandemic, and 16 were conducted after. Then, data related to academic stress variables from each study were collected and compared with the students' psychological well-being results. The data were categorized based on similarities, resulting in five conceptual categories encompassing the identified factors.

Afterward, the findings and conclusions of each study were carefully examined, with a special focus on the authors' interpretation of how academic stress affects psychological well-being, along with the factors that worsened stress in various settings. This analysis gave us a better understanding of the connections between the different variables and their influences on the well-being of college students.

Once the data were arranged in comparative tables, a higher-level thematic analysis was performed, contrasting the categories identified in the studies conducted during and after the pandemic. This process allowed us to detect similarities and differences in the factors associated with academic stress and their impact on psychological well-being in both contexts. Finally, the synthesis was organized in a table for each group of studies analyzed, for presentation and subsequent hermeneutic and heuristic analyses.

3. Results

3.1. Study Selection

To show the different phases of exclusion and inclusion applied in this systematic review, the PRISMA 2020 flow diagram [71], composed of the stages of Identification, Screening, and Included, was used (Figure 1).

In the Identification phase, after applying the search criteria, 108 records were identified in Scopus and 110 were identified in WoS, totaling 218. Out of the total, 83 duplicate records indexed in both sources were excluded. Also, two documents that did not contain an abstract were found; therefore, they were excluded. In this first phase, 85 records in total were excluded, and 133 were selected for the next phase.

In the Screening phase, a blind assessment was first made through the abstract of each study included. The reviewers agreed to exclude 69 publications unrelated to the study, leaving 64 papers for the following stages.

Then, after trying to obtain the full-text documents through various sources, five studies were inaccessible. These studies could not be retrieved due to the obstacles generated by the lack of institutional access to these sources and the high costs of individual acquisition. Considering these limitations and the previously established protocols, these studies were excluded from the following phases. Finally, a total of 59 publications were collected for eligibility evaluation.

A second blinded review was then performed by exhaustive full-text reading. For this evaluation, eight content analysis criteria were used as a guide. After contrasting the coincidences and divergences in the ratings and discussing the doubtful cases, 22 studies were excluded. The frequency of negatively assessed cases in the excluded documents was as follows:

1. Psychological well-being: Twenty-one studies did not contain a consequence, effect, or impact on psychological well-being since it was assessed as an independent variable and, in some cases, as a subjectively analyzed category.

2. Academic stress: Twenty studies did not assess academic stress but other forms of stress in a population of students. It was also found that some studies only mentioned academic stress but did not perform a punctual analysis of this variable.
3. Conclusion: Nineteen studies presented conclusions that did not correspond to the study objective. Many of these studies did not consider psychological well-being or academic stress in their conclusions.
4. Study objective: Seventeen studies pursued a purpose other than assessing academic stress on the psychological well-being of college students. Although they had these variables in the report, they did not appear as the central objective of the study, or their purpose was other than the association between the variables.
5. Study design: Fifteen studies presented designs other than the association of variables. Ten of them were qualitative studies that presented independent analyses between variables.
6. Data analysis: Ten studies did not present objective (statistical) evidence of the association between variables.
7. Instruments: Five studies did not use objective data collection instruments but very subjective observation guides.
8. Population: Four studies did not consider college students as the main study group but rather university teachers or the university community.

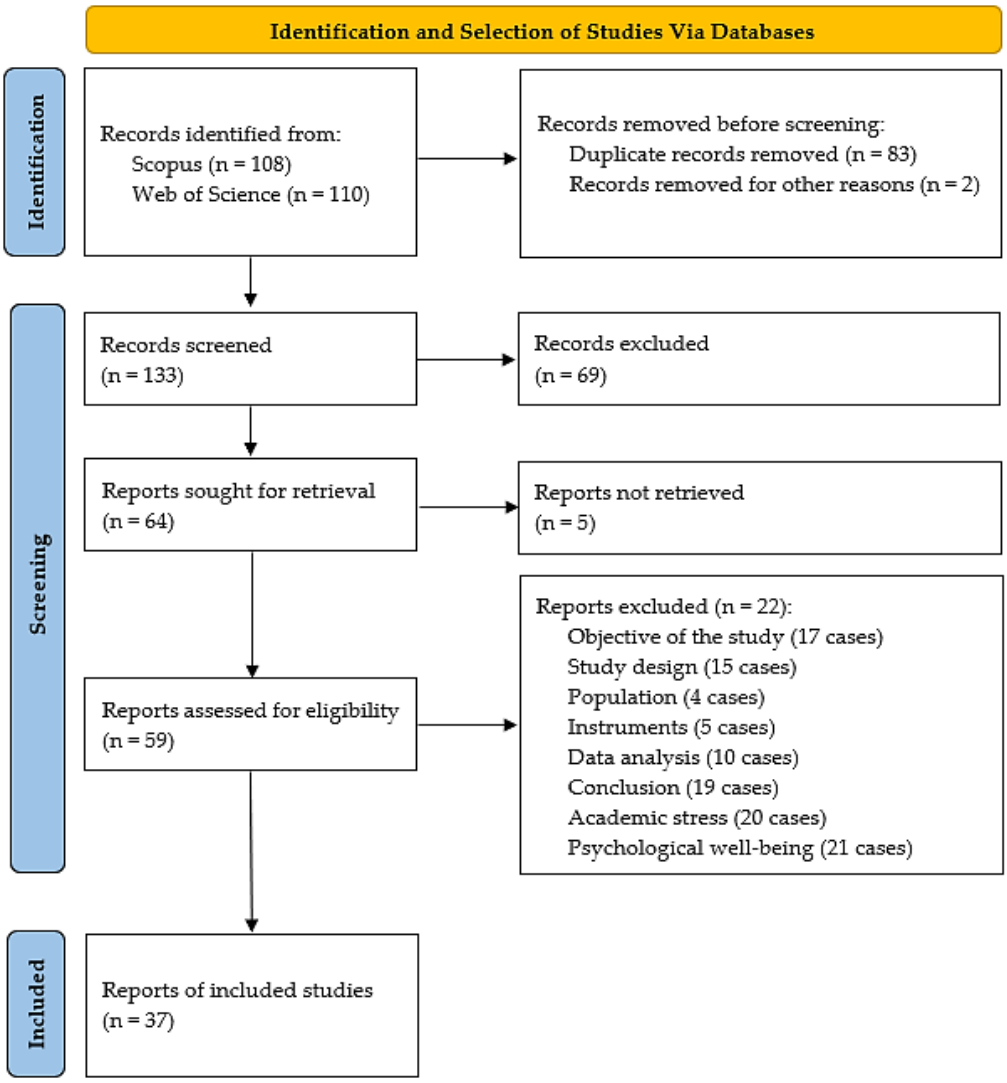

Figure 1. The PRISMA 2020 flow diagram of the study selection process.

Finally, in the Included phase, 37 articles were included according to the stipulated criteria. It should be noted that no additional incorporations were made to those found in the databases. The included publications were thoroughly analyzed to determine the factors associated with academic stress linked to deficits in the psychological well-being of college students during and after the pandemic.

The complete list of selected studies, and each exclusion made, is presented in a spreadsheet linked to the Supplementary Materials.

3.2. Study Characteristics

Table 4 presents the 37 articles included in the review, showing the authors, the years, the titles of the articles, and the countries where the studies were carried out.

Table 4. Studies selected for analysis of results *.

Authors	Year	Title	Country
Bartoszek et al. [18].	2020	Mental well-being (depression, loneliness, insomnia, daily life fatigue) during COVID-19 related home-confinement—A study from Poland.	Poland
Eden et al. [30].	2020	Media for coping curing COVID-19 social distancing: stress, anxiety, and psychological well-being.	USA
Fernandes et al. [72].	2020	Check-in: an educational activity to address well-being and burnout among pharmacy students.	Canada
Lane et al. [73].	2020	Worried, weary and worn out: Mixed-method study of stress and well-being in final-year medical students.	United Kingdom
Malinauskas and Malinauskiene [54].	2020	The relationship between emotional intelligence and psychological well-being among male university students: The mediating role of perceived social support and perceived stress.	Lithuania
Mattern et al. [74].	2020	The key is not spending but investing time—Students' time management and the impact on perceived stress and psychological well-being.	Germany
Ponzo et al. [75].	2020	Efficacy of the digital therapeutic mobile app BioBase to reduce stress and improve mental well-being among university students: Randomized controlled trial.	United Kingdom
Rehman et al. [46].	2020	Linking burnout to psychological well-being: The mediating role of social support and learning motivation.	China
Yu and Chae [36].	2020	The mediating effect of resilience on the relationship between academic burnout and psychological well-being of medical students.	South Korea
Bastemeyer and Kleinert [76].	2021	Mental health in sports students—A cohort study on study-related stress, general well-being, and general risk for depression.	Germany
Clabaugh et al. [53].	2021	Academic stress and emotional well-being in United States college students following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.	USA
de la Fuente et al. [77].	2021	A cross-sectional study of resilience, positivity, and coping strategies as predictors of engagement-burnout in undergraduate students: Implications for prevention and treatment in mental well-being.	Spain
Delgado-Tenorio et al. [47].	2021	The moderator role of procrastination in the relationship between academic stress and psychological well-being in undergraduate students.	Peru
Klainin-Yobas et al. [78].	2021	Evaluating the relationships among stress, resilience and psychological well-being among young adults: a structural equation modeling approach.	Singapore
Labrague [28].	2021	Resilience as a mediator in the relationship between stress associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, life satisfaction, and psychological well-being in student nurses: A cross-sectional study.	Philippines

Table 4. *Cont.*

Authors	Year	Title	Country
Lopes & Nihei [25].	2021	Depression, anxiety and stress symptoms in Brazilian university students during the COVID-19 pandemic: Predictors and association with life satisfaction, psychological well-being and coping strategies.	Brazil
Rutkowska et al. [21].	2021	Stress levels and mental well-being among Slovak students during e-learning in the COVID-19 pandemic.	Slovakia
Tan et al. [20].	2021	Psychological well-being in Chinese college students during the COVID-19 pandemic: roles of resilience and environmental stress.	China
Aleksejuniene et al. [79].	2022	European student wellness, stress, coping, support and perceptions about remote dental training during COVID-19.	Canada
Barbayannis et al. [44].	2022	Academic stress and mental well-being in college students: Correlations, affected groups, and COVID-19.	USA
Carpi et al. [64].	2022	Well-being, perceived stress and their relations with health-relevant behaviors among Italian medical students: A cross-sectional study at Sapienza University of Rome.	Italy
Cheng et al. [80].	2022	The moderating role of coping style on the relationship between stress and psychological well-being in Hong Kong nursing students.	China
Forycka et al. [23].	2022	Polish medical students facing the pandemic —Assessment of resilience, well-being, and burnout in the COVID-19 era.	Poland
Guszkowska and Dąbrowska-Zimakowska [52].	2022	Coping with stress during the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic by Polish university students: Strategies, structure, and relation to psychological well-being.	Poland
Lathabhavan and Vispute [24].	2022	Examining the mediating effects of stress on fear of COVID-19 and well-being using structural equation modeling.	India
Mcloughlin et al. [81].	2022	The impact of COVID-19 on burnout, psychological well-being, and work satisfaction in psychiatry trainees in Ireland.	Ireland
Mookerjee et al. [82].	2022	Student stress and its association with student performance and psychological well-being: an empirical study on higher academic education students in and around Hyderabad metro.	India
Mülder et al. [83].	2022	Distinct patterns of university students study crafting and the relationships to exhaustion, well-being, and engagement.	Germany
Tran et al. [48].	2022	Self-compassion, mindfulness, stress, and self-esteem among Vietnamese university students: Psychological well-being and positive emotion as mediators.	Vietnam
Tran et al. [27].	2022	Psychological distress and well-being among students of health disciplines in Geneva, Switzerland: The importance of academic satisfaction in the context of academic year-end and COVID-19 stress on their learning experience.	Switzerland
Al Sultan et al. [62].	2023	The mediating role of psychological capital between academic stress and well-being among university students.	Saudi Arabia
Almutairi et al. [84].	2023	Sources of stress and well-being among Saudi Arabian undergraduate dental students.	Saudi Arabia
Brachtl et al. [31].	2023	Physical home-learning environments of traditional and non-traditional students during the COVID pandemic: Exploring the impact of learning space on students' motivation, stress, and well-being.	Austria
Chue and Cheung [85].	2023	Mental resilience enhances the well-being of Singaporean college students by reducing burnout.	Singapore
Fazia et al. [50].	2023	Improving stress management, anxiety, and mental well-being in medical students through an online Mindfulness-Based Intervention: A randomized study.	Italy
Peng et al. [86].	2023	The impact of employment stress on college students: Psychological well-being during COVID-19 pandemic in China.	China
Podubinski et al. [32].	2023	An exploration of mental health, stress, and well-being concerns among health students undertaking rural placements in Australia during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic.	Australia

* The study selection process and list of data collected are in a spreadsheet linked in the Supplementary Materials.

Table 4 shows the number of articles addressing the relationship between academic stress and psychological well-being in college students during and after the COVID-19 pandemic that met the inclusion criteria established for this study. Between 2020 and early October 2023, 37 research papers were published and indexed in Scopus and WoS. The annual average was nine articles, and there was an upward trend until a peak of twelve papers was reached in 2022, which dropped to seven in 2023. The publication rate remained similar in 2020 and 2021, with nine yearly studies.

The results show an increasing trend in research on this topic in 2022, evidencing an interest in determining the repercussions that the health crisis and its aftermath could have on the academic stress of college students and the subsequent impact on their psychological well-being. The decreasing trend observed in 2023 could be attributed to the period covering only up to the first days of October, so it is probable that the number of publications was higher at the end of that year.

Table 4 also shows the geographical distribution of the countries where the research included in the systematic review was carried out. A key finding is the predominance of studies conducted in Asian countries (54%), led by China. In contrast, Latin America is underrepresented, with only 8% of studies coming from Peru and Brazil. North America contributes 23% of the research conducted in the college student population, while Europe accounts for 15% of the studies. This highlights the need to develop more research on the impact of academic stress on psychological well-being among Latin American college students to understand their specific realities, especially in a post-pandemic context. The distribution of research is concentrated in highly populated countries in Asia. However, there is a need for data from other regions to develop effective intervention strategies that are sensitive to local contexts. It is worth mentioning that Table 4 does not show the countries where the studies are published but the countries where the research was conducted.

3.3. Results of Syntheses

After reviewing the articles incorporated into the analysis and categorization of the different variables linked to academic stress regarding the psychological well-being of college students in pandemic and non-pandemic contexts, five thematic categories were established to group the factors evaluated in the various studies: (1) variables referring to processes of adaptation to change; (2) variables associated with study modalities; (3) variables linked to access to learning resources; (4) indicator variables of life–academic activity balance; and (5) variables with socio-emotional components.

A comparative analysis of these categories in both scenarios is carried out to determine potential differences in the levels of psychological well-being of college students due to the presence of these groups of mediating variables of academic stress in times of a global health crisis and forced remote education.

3.3.1. Variables Linked to Academic Stress Related to the Psychological Well-Being of College Students during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Table 5 shows the variables linked to academic stress within the context of the pandemic and the effect recorded on the psychological well-being of college students. These variables have been grouped into five categories to carry out the analysis.

The "Adaptation to change" category shows a set of variables that show the difficulties experienced by college students in adjusting to the disruptive transformations in teaching–learning dynamics both during the abrupt transition to virtualization at the beginning of the pandemic and in the subsequent return to face-to-face activities after a prolonged period of confinement. Specifically, three groups of main variables are identified: (a) a negative attitude toward education in isolation contexts, which denotes an unfavorable predisposition and rejection of students to continue training processes mediated by technology in confinement scenarios; (b) resistance to adopt virtual teaching-learning modalities, which indicates the reluctance and opposition of students to manage digital environments due to the lack of prior preparation and familiarity with online platforms;

and (c) forced acceptance of new formats characterized by an involuntary approval of online study methods due to resignation at the impossibility of returning to face-to-face classes. These variables, related to the adaptive difficulties in the face of the drastic changes imposed by the pandemic context, entail documented adverse effects on the psychological well-being of college students, such as (a) decreases in academic performance and satisfaction when contrasted with previous measurements; (b) anxious and depressive symptoms in relevant percentages of students; (c) demotivation, apathy, and negligence regarding educational activities; and (d) dropout from training programs in critical cases.

Table 5. Variables linked to academic stress related to the psychological well-being of college students during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Category	Variables Linked to Academic Stress	Impact or Result on Student Well-Being	References
Adaptation to change	Negative attitude toward isolation situation.	Low perceived well-being. Academic dropout. Increased anxiety.	[18,21,31,79]
	Resistance to virtual education.	Hopelessness. Frustration. Disinterest in studies. Academic negligence. High procrastination.	[18,27,31,79]
	Forced acceptance of distance education methods.	Low academic performance. Rejection of virtual classes. Disinterest in teamwork.	[21,79]
Study modality	Transition to completely virtual education.	Low mastery of environment. Low appreciation of learning. Discomfort due to lack of resources.	[31,79]
	Technostress. Emotional exhaustion due to frequent exposure to screens.	Physical and emotional fatigue. Academic dissatisfaction.	[18,31,79]
	Virtual academic activities.	Dissatisfaction with service received. Negligence in learning.	[31,79]
Learning resources	Stress due to lack of equipment and internet.	Increased symptoms of depression. Decreased mastery of environment.	[27,31,48,79]
	Insufficient digital skills.	Concern about low academic performance. Increased academic anxiety. Feeling of lack of personal growth.	[21,24,79]
	Inadequate study conditions at home. Environmental stress.	Increased feelings of hopelessness. Limited mastery of environment. Increased symptoms of depression. Reduced well-being.	[20,23,30,31]
Academic–life balance	Perception of excessive academic tasks. Stress due to academic workload.	Negative assessment of psychological well-being. Feeling of lack of coping strategies. Dissatisfaction with academic activities.	[21,28,44,52,53,79]
	Limited interactions with classmates and teachers.	Greater fatigue in daily life among female students. Increased feelings of loneliness in students. Reduced motivation.	[18,30,46]
	Decrease in leisure and recreational activities.	Increased symptoms of depression. Reduced mental well-being. Increased anxiety.	[18,30,53]

Table 5. *Cont.*

Category	Variables Linked to Academic Stress	Impact or Result on Student Well-Being	References
	Lack of organization. Inadequate schedules for academic activities.	Fatigue due to academic tasks. Low quality of sleep and rest. Insomnia.	[18,44,47,53,79]
	Inattention to work and family activities. Work stress. Environmental stress.	Negative effects on emotional balance. Increased symptoms of depression. Low resilience.	[20,23,86]
Socio-emotional variables	Fear of COVID-19 infection.	Increased symptoms of anxiety.	[24,52]
	Uncertainty about professional future. Negative thinking about the future. Psychological distress.	Excessive concern about academic and work future. Increased anxiety. Reduced mental well-being.	[21,27,50,81]
	Isolation. Limited social interactions.	Perception of loneliness. Increased symptoms of depression. Reduced resilience.	[18,20,23,28,30]
	Procrastination and postponement of tasks.	Reduction in time dedicated to academic activities. Increased anxiety.	[47]
	Demotivation and academic apathy.	Negligence regarding academic activities. Reduced psychological well-being. Hopelessness.	[44,47,81]
	Academic burnout. Emotional exhaustion.	Decrease in general well-being. Reduced mental well-being. Reduced satisfaction with life.	[21,23–25,27,28,32,46,50,52,72,81]

Likewise, the "Study modality" category groups variables related to the transformations in the teaching–learning dynamics and environments due to the pandemic confinement and the consequent abrupt virtualization of the educational experience. Specifically, it covers phenomena such as the sudden transition toward completely digitalized training spaces. This leads to a perception of a lack of control and mastery over aspects such as platform management, access to online resources, or effective interaction with peers and teachers. Such a feeling of digital incompetence is associated with discomfort and negative assessments about the quality of the professional training received virtually. Another variable identified is the frequent exposure to screens for prolonged periods due to remote education, called "technostress". The resulting physical and mental exhaustion is associated with emotional fatigue, tiredness, eye strain, dissatisfaction, and demotivation toward academic activities. Likewise, student dissatisfaction with the dynamics of virtual classes is recorded as they perceive a lower quality and practical usefulness of the methods used compared to previous face-to-face experiences. This results in disinterest, negligence regarding learning responsibilities, and a generally unfavorable assessment of online courses. Therefore, the disruptive changes in study modalities imposed by the pandemic context led to perceptions of a lack of control of the training environment and physical–emotional exhaustion that negatively impacted multiple indicators of well-being and academic satisfaction in college students.

In addition, the "Learning Resources" category compiles variables referring to limitations in access to essential tools for the optimal use of academic activities during emergency remote education in the context of the pandemic. Specifically, three main variables are identified: (a) deficit in computer equipment and stable internet connectivity, which constrains participation in tasks and performance evaluation processes in virtual modalities during confinement; (b) insufficient digital competencies and skills of some students to navigate effectively in virtual learning environments and capitalize on the opportunities available on online platforms; and (c) inadequate conditions of study spaces in homes,

referring to the lack of conducive environments during confinement for academic tasks that require prolonged periods of concentration in front of screens. These variables, linked to restrictions on resources that are essential for adaptation to emergency remote learning, are associated with the following documented effects on psycho-emotional well-being: (a) discomfort, frustration and anxious–depressive symptoms in the face of obstacles to academic progress during confinement; (b) concern about poor performance and a feeling of personal stagnation due to not being able to take advantage of virtual technologies and platforms optimally; and (c) increased environmental stress and feelings of hopelessness due to the impossibility of organizing effectively for remote tasks in homes.

Similarly, the "Academic–life balance" category compiles variables that show the difficulties of balancing educational demands with other relevant areas during confinement due to the pandemic. Among these, the variables identified were (a) a perception of excessive academic tasks, which, according to studies, is associated with stress and a feeling of a lack of effective coping strategies, as students dedicate most of their time to remote study in detriment to other vital activities; (b) limited social interactions during confinement, which increases daily mental fatigue as they are deprived of the support and stability provided by close ties, according to research on their protective role against distress; (c) a decrease in recreational activities, related by specialized studies in the literature to an increase in depression indicators and a reduction in well-being, by eliminating common sources of positive stimulation and satisfaction in college students; and (d) lack of organization and inadequate schedules, which hinder restorative circadian rhythms linked to emotional regulation and optimal performance, thus enhancing burnout and chronic fatigue documented by various studies in students during high-demand exam periods.

Finally, the "Socio-emotional" category groups variables that denote disruptive phenomena of affective well-being and emotional stability in college students as a collateral effect of the drastic restrictions on social interaction imposed during the pandemic confinement. In the studies reviewed, the following variables were identified: (a) fear of COVID-19 contagion, which could trigger anxiety crises when imagining fatal scenarios regarding one's own health or that of close relatives; (b) paralyzing uncertainty about academic and employment future when perceiving that the global health crisis generated a volatile economic outlook that would complicate employability upon graduation; (c) forced social isolation and a loss of in-person support networks that are vital to developing purpose during the training stage and the transition after the beginning of professional life; and (d) academic procrastination that reduces time dedicated to enriching activities for personal growth. Such phenomena are associated with the following documented effects on psycho-emotional well-being: (a) anxious symptomatology with episodes of existential crisis regarding uncertain prospects for the future; (b) feelings of loneliness and emotional isolation from usual support networks; (c) demotivation, apathy, and the inability to self-regulate adequate study habits; and (d) mental exhaustion, severe indicators of academic burnout, and reduced psychological well-being in general.

3.3.2. Variables Linked to Academic Stress Related to the Psychological Well-Being of College Students after the COVID-19 Pandemic

Table 6 presents the variables linked to academic stress after the pandemic and the effect recorded on the psychological well-being of college students. To carry out the analysis and compare it with the results in Table 5, these variables were grouped into the same five categories expressed above.

Table 6. Variables linked to academic stress related to the psychological well-being of college students after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Category	Variables Linked to Academic Stress	Impact or Result on Psychological Well-Being	References
Adaptation to change	Time management. Use of technology.	No relationship with stress.	[74]
	Worry about exams. Fear of the future.	Risk of depression. Deterioration of mental health. Sleep disturbances. Fatigue.	[73,76]
	Coping strategy.	Prevents personal problems from affecting well-being.	[77,80]
	Self-efficacy. Resilience.	Less resistance to change. Improves well-being.	[36,77,78]
Study modality	Use of technology for learning.	Improves time management.	[74]
	Virtualization.	Autonomy in academic activities	[74]
Learning resources	Learning affected by stress.	Decreases well-being.	[80]
	Self-confidence. Effort.	Improves learning. Increases well-being.	[77]
	Resilience.	Increases academic engagement	[77,78]
	Digital interventions to control anxiety and stress.	Reduces depression and increases well-being.	[75]
Academic–life balance	Personal problems.	Reduces well-being	[80]
	Spirituality.	Increases mental health and reduces stress.	[80]
	Excessive thinking. Lack of concentration.	Increases stress levels and reduces perceived well-being.	[73]
	Exhaustion from academic activities.	Affects engagement and well-being.	[83]
Socio-emotional variables	Sociodemographic variables (sex, specialty, and academic year).	Science careers affect psychological capital more. Academic years reduce stress and increase well-being. Women report greater stress and lower well-being than men.	[36,62,64,76,84]
	Academic stress. Academic burnout.	Psychological capital reduces stress and increases well-being. Reduction in perception of well-being. Reduces academic performance.	[27,36,54,62,82]
	Anxiety, depression, and distress.	Reduces quality of life.	[64,85]
	Procrastination. Hopelessness.	High levels of stress.	[73]
	Consumption of drugs.	Low level of well-being and increase in stress.	[64]
	Social support. Mindfulness. Self-esteem.	Reduces exhaustion. Reduces distress and anxiety levels. Reduces academic stress.	[48,54,85]

The "Adaptation to change" category compiles variables linked to the ability of college students to adapt to gradual modifications in their routines and training environments under standard conditions not mediated by exceptional situations such as pandemic periods. In this group, there are variables such as (a) the effective management of study times and use of technological tools to optimize academic tasks (which is not directly related to higher levels of stress according to the evidence collected, which may be due to the fact that, under typical circumstances, the gradual incorporation of new resources is adaptable for most

students); (b) concern and uncertainty linked to the proximity of deadlines for relevant deliveries and exams (which, in demanding contexts of the evaluative load, is linked to physiological indicators of anxiety, difficulty in resting adequately, and even emotional exhaustion due to the feeling of pressure to obtain good academic results); and (c) the deployment of coping strategies to prevent personal setbacks from affecting educational performance (which reveals a protective role on well-being by preventing problems related to the training context from intensifying the baseline levels of stress experienced by students in conventional academic life). Therefore, this review suggests that being adaptable to gradual changes and utilizing effective support resources and tactics can mitigate the potential impact of typical challenges on students' subjective well-being during stable periods.

Likewise, the "Study modality" category compiles variables alluding to the gradual transformations in pedagogical methods and knowledge transmission channels in higher education institutions, gradually incorporating elements such as virtual platforms or technological applications to control academic stress. In this regard, the reviewed study shows dynamics such as (a) the adoption of new technologies to manage time and control stress derived from academic activities and (b) the gradual virtualization of some modules or subject dimensions through online campus, multimedia resources, and occasional virtual interactions. This gradual flexibility of academic environments, in contrast to the sudden transitions observed during the pandemic, is not usually associated in specialized studies in the literature with increases in distress among college students. A certain level of autonomy and self-management of the learning process confers advantages in terms of time management and the optimization of academic performance.

Similarly, the "Learning Resources" category has variables associated with the access and use of tools to enhance results and training experience under conventional face-to-face teaching conditions. Specifically, the factors identified are (a) momentary deficits in concentration or practice opportunities that could temporarily affect learning, slightly increasing the perceived academic stress according to the studies reviewed; (b) self-confidence and additional dedication of efforts that college students can deploy to compensate for training gaps, thus improving the mastery of course material and preserving the well-being linked to perceiving personal academic progress; (c) resilience to overcome and learn from mistakes, as well as constructively taking advantage of negative feedback from teachers in favor of growth, which, according to the research, correlates positively with student engagement; and (d) complementary digital interventions that reinforce emotional regulation skills, with scientific evidence on their effectiveness in reducing symptoms of anxiety and moderate stress that are frequent in times of demanding evaluations.

Likewise, the "Academic–life balance" category compiles variables that denote the ability to harmonize and effectively manage the requirements and pressures of academic life with the requirements of growth and satisfaction in other vital areas for subjective well-being. Regarding this, the literature reviewed accounts for the following variables linked to academic stress: (a) the occasional influence of personal problems on the concentration and focused attention necessary to achieve good academic performance, which temporarily reduces academic satisfaction and increases levels of stress in students; (b) practice of contemplative exercises and spiritual connection to mitigate the impact of stress on mental health, as has been empirically demonstrated, by providing alternative coping mechanisms and emotional support; (c) falling into patterns of intrusive thinking and rumination that could exacerbate perceptions of overwhelm in the face of a high evaluative load, with neurophysiological correlations of anxiety being documented in various investigations. Overall, in stable times, the balance between academic demands and attention to other areas of personal development seems to be a relevant protective variable, which counteracts over-demanding studies and preserves the psychological well-being of college students.

Finally, the "Socio-emotional" category groups socio-emotional variables with the potential impact on college students' experiences and subjective well-being in conventional times of academic stability. In the reviewed studies, the following variables were compiled: (a) the differential effects of socio-demographic factors on the levels of stress and satisfaction

with academic life according to findings in the scientific literature, for example, women and students of more demanding majors would tend to report higher levels of stress and lower well-being than other student groups; (b) anxious, depressive, and hopeless symptoms in the face of academic difficulties, as well as the recreational use of substances as a dysfunctional avoidance mechanism, which correlates with the deterioration of mental well-being according to studies in the field of addictions and higher education; (c) protectors of well-being, such as perceived social support, mindfulness strategies, and positive self-esteem, as well as reserves of psychological capital, which mitigate the attacks of stress and distress in challenging university contexts according to the lines of research reviewed. It is concluded that the socio-affective state, personological resources, and coping strategies influence college students' real and perceived well-being in conventional demanding academic situations.

3.3.3. A Comparative Analysis of the Impact of Variables Linked to Academic Stress on the Psychological Well-Being of College Students during and after the COVID-19 Pandemic

As a final synthesis of the evidence, a comparative analysis of the consequences of academic stress on the psychological well-being of college students, shown in Tables 5 and 6, is presented. To carry this out, each category of both tables will be analyzed to find notable differences between them.

Regarding the "Adaptation to change" category shown in Tables 5 and 6, marked divergences are seen in terms of the level of impact on the psychological well-being of college students. Although during a pandemic, the complexities of adjusting to remote modalities are consistently associated with a wide range of negative consequences, including reduced academic satisfaction, anxious and depressive symptoms, demotivation, and educational negligence [18,21,27,31,79], in conventional periods, the literature links gradual adaptability to the incorporation of new resources or demands to limited increases in distress, limited to specific episodes of a high evaluative load [73,76]. Even certain changes, such as effectively managing study times with technology, are not directly related to stress in stable contexts [74]. In this line, the deployment of discomfort control strategies seems to mitigate the fact that common difficulties derived from personal problems substantially impact baseline levels of well-being [77,80]. In summary, the analyzed evidence suggests a significant contrast between the experience of overwhelming stress and generalized dissatisfaction during the forced educational virtualization in the pandemic compared to the circumscribed and relatively limited responses that limited specific stressors usually provoke in conventional situations.

Regarding the "Study modality" category, the sudden shift to virtual education during the pandemic has been linked to perceptions of digital incompetence, a lack of control in the virtual educational environment, and significant dissatisfaction and exhaustion among students [31,79]. In contrast, evidence from traditional settings indicates that the gradual integration of digital tools is associated with improved time management, academic performance, and even autonomy in the learning process [74]. Implementing digital technologies has resulted in transformations in teaching and learning methods. Nevertheless, there are notable differences in the implementation rates, the results, and the impact on students. The sudden change resulting from the closure of face-to-face educational institutions during the pandemic was associated in several studies with a decline in critical indicators of psycho-academic well-being among university students [31,79]. However, gradually improving teaching methods by making certain content and additional online materials more flexible seems to enhance some learning experiences in more stable situations [74]. In conclusion, although both categories denote processes of transformation of study modalities through the introduction of digital technologies, the evidence suggests significant adverse changes in multiple domains of psychoeducational well-being exclusively in times of abrupt implementation and the total massification of virtual formats due to the effect of physical distancing measures during the health crisis.

Regarding "Learning resources," there are significant challenges in accessing necessary digital tools, reliable internet connection, and suitable learning environments during remote education emergencies [20,21,23,24,27,30,31,48,79]. These challenges have been linked in various studies to feelings of depression and low academic performance among students [27,31,48]. However, the literature analyzing traditional learning environments only mentions minor and temporary difficulties in concentration [80]. This suggests that students can overcome these challenges by relying on their internal protective resources, such as self-confidence and dedication to learning, without causing harm to their well-being [77,78]. After comparing the evidence, it can be concluded that the difficulties in accessing essential resources for adapting to remote learning were significantly linked to high levels of distress and reduced well-being among many college students during the pandemic, as indicated by several studies [27,31,48]. On the other hand, in conventional times, the data suggest that students generally maintained good psychological well-being even when faced with minor challenges.

In the "Academic–life balance" category, there are concerns about the imbalance between academic workload and personal needs, especially during confinement. This imbalance has evidently documented consequences on students' emotional regulation and indicators of mental well-being [18,20,23,28,30,44,46,52,53,79,86]. However, during conventional times, the evidence suggests limited impacts of specific tensions, such as minor transient deficits in concentration [73]. In response to these deficits, strategies that focus on spiritual and emotional well-being are activated to protect mental health [80]. Even certain personal problems that could circumstantially affect the academic experience would show a minor and focused effect, which is in clear contrast to the multiple spheres of psycho-affective well-being affected by the restrictions on social contact and recreational activities imposed during confinements, according to various reports [18,20,23,28,30]. From the above, it appears that the sudden virtualization of teaching exacerbated the imbalance between demands and satisfaction of needs for a majority of college students, comprehensively impacting their mood regulation and subjective well-being [18,20,23,28,30,44,46,52,53,79,86]. This relationship is not evident in stable contexts, where data suggest that circumscribed variations activate protective coping resources against habitual academic distress.

Finally, in the "Socio-emotional" category, unlike the factors related to the overwhelming fear of COVID-19 [24,52], uncertainty about the future [21,27,50,81], and social isolation, which are linked to feelings of loneliness, apathy, and burnout among students [18,20,23,28,30,44,47,81], in non-pandemic contexts, the effects of sociodemographic factors and substance consumption on baseline stress levels in stable environments are suggested [36,62,64,76,84], along with the protective role of psycho-emotional resources in dealing with academic pressure [48,54,85]. When contrasting scenarios, the sudden confinement and consequent physical distancing show a recurrent link in various studies to disruptive emotional indicators, such as existential distress, a feeling of isolation, and depressive and anxious symptoms that had a comprehensive impact on the subjective well-being of large percentages of college students [18,20,23,28,30,44,47,81]. However, data from stable times suggest a much more limited impact on these socio-affective dimensions among students. In short, the abrupt distancing imposed specifically during the health crisis would exacerbate the effect of socio-emotional protective and risk factors on the mood regulation and psycho-affective satisfaction abilities of college students.

As an early conclusion, the analyzed evidence allows us to affirm that the sudden shift to the virtualization of academic activities due to confinement measures during the COVID-19 pandemic would exacerbate manifestations of stress and impair psychological well-being among college students significantly more than in conventional times. Specifically, adaptive challenges, abrupt shifts in educational methods, technological and space limitations, changes in the balance between levels of demands and meeting needs across various areas of development, and prolonged physical distancing with detrimental emotional effects are strongly associated with widespread issues related to mood regulation, life satisfaction, and mental health among a significant portion of college students during periods of confinement.

In contrast, the evidence from standard non-pandemic contexts mostly points to specific episodes and focused variables, whose impacts on psycho-affective well-being are usually mitigated thanks to the internal and external resources for controlling distress available before the crisis. Therefore, based on a critical analysis of various research documents, it is evident that students' academic experiences during confinement were significantly disruptive. The resulting impact on their mental well-being extended beyond what is typically observed under normal conditions. This suggests long-term consequences that higher education institutions still need to address adequately.

4. Discussion

This review study has two objectives: (1) to identify the variables linked to academic stress associated with the psychological well-being of college students during and after the COVID-19 pandemic and (2) to verify whether there are differences in the psychological well-being of college students associated with academic stress experienced during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

4.1. Variables Linked to Academic Stress Related to Psychological Well-Being during the Pandemic

Concerning the first objective of this review, the data collected from the reviewed studies allowed us to categorize the various factors associated with stress manifestations that impacted the psycho-affective well-being of college students inside and outside the context of COVID-19 in five categories: (1) variables referring to processes of adaptation to change; (2) variables associated with study modalities; (3) variables linked to access to learning resources; (4) indicator variables of academic–life balance; and (5) variables with socio-emotional components.

Regarding the results of the pandemic, various factors were recorded for each exposed category. Regarding the "Adaptation to change" category, the variables show the complexities of students in adapting to disruptive transformations during abrupt virtualization [18,21,31,79], which resulted in academic dissatisfaction, anxiety, educational apathy, and negligence of responsibilities among college students [18,21,27,31,79]. Regarding "Study modality", the findings indicate perceptions of a lack of control over the forced digital environment [31,79] and significant exhaustion due to overexposure to screens [18,31,79], relating this to discomfort with the quality of the online education received, emotional fatigue, and demotivation among students [31,79]. Likewise, regarding "Learning resources", restrictions on access to technological tools and adequate study spaces during confinement exacerbated depressive symptoms, a feeling of personal stagnation, and environmental stress in relevant percentages of college students [27,31,48,79]. In the "Academic–life balance" category, tension is evident between educational loads and carelessness in vital areas such as relationships or recreation [21,28,44,52,53,79], with consequences of chronic fatigue, loneliness, and reduced mental well-being [18,30,46,53]. Finally, in the "Socio-emotional" category, quarantines exacerbated social isolation [18,20,23,28,30] and academic burnout [21,23–25,27,28,32], documenting severe consequences of existential distress, symptoms of anxious–depressive disorders, and the deterioration of general well-being during confinement.

The examined categories exhibit a common thread around the sudden disruption of educational dynamics due to the closure of in-person institutions and the subsequent forced virtualization of teaching due to the health crisis. Specifically, the sudden change in modality without prior preparation, exacerbated by deficiencies in essential resources for effective adaptation to online environments and drastic limitations on social contact during critical periods of development, led to variables that exceeded students' abilities to preserve their well-being. In this regard, specialized studies in the literature suggest that perceiving a lack of control and prediction over external demands constitutes a precursor to stress and subjective deterioration by exceeding internal resources [13,37,38]. Likewise, prolonged relational deprivation would further compromise regulatory abilities in the face of distress [46–49]. The studies analyzed show a consistent link between disruptive factors of

isolation with disruptive emotional manifestations and a wide spectrum of discomfort, from anxious–depressive symptoms and feelings of incompetence to chronic fatigue, educational apathy, and fatalistic ideas about the future among college students [18,20,21,27–30,52–54]. In conclusion, the accumulated impact of identified variables would have overwhelmed adaptive resources in learners to face the demands imposed by the abrupt virtualization of their training experience in the pandemic, with clear consequences that still need to be mitigated after resuming in-person attendance.

4.2. Variables Linked to Academic Stress Related to Psychological Well-Being after the Pandemic

Regarding the results after the pandemic, a series of factors were recorded in each of the five categories. In the "Adaptation to change" category, the effective management of study time with technological support does not directly correlate with higher stress levels [74]. This may be explained by the fact that the gradual incorporation of resources makes it easier to adapt without feeling overwhelmed [77,78]. However, episodes of high demand are occasionally associated with temporary discomfort due to occasional overwhelm. Regarding the "Study modalities" category, the gradual virtualization of content or complementary methods is also not usually linked to distress or dissatisfaction among students [74]. These data suggest that, under stable conditions, some self-management of learning through technology is even valued in promoting effective time management. Concerning the "Learning resources" category, minor concentration deficits or an occasional lack of study materials, which may lead to brief discomfort [80], indicate the activation of psycho-emotional resources that help fill gaps without compromising well-being [77,78]. This contrasts with severe technological deficits during the pandemic [27,31,48]. Similarly, in the "Academic–life balance" category, personal problems that circumstantially involve focused attention [73,80] show mild effects, which are mitigated by activating emotional and spiritual coping strategies in the face of tensions [80]. Finally, in the "Socio-emotional" category, certain demographic factors are moderately linked to greater perceived stress [36,62,64]; however, the protective role of psycho-emotional reserves and coping strategies that mitigate acute stressful episodes characteristic of conventional times stands out [36,48,54,62,82], disagreeing with the severe effects of forced isolation on emotional well-being.

In a more exhaustive analysis, outside of pandemic disruptions, the categories reflect gradual changes that tend to activate adaptive resources in students to preserve well-being instead of entailing severe emotional consequences on mental health. For example, the effective management of study times with technology is not directly linked to greater stress [74]. Meanwhile, gradual flexibility of modalities avoids feelings of a lack of control or incompetence associated with increased distress and subjective deterioration according to the theory [6,13,37,38]. Even minor concentration deficits denote the activation of psycho-emotional reserves to compensate for circumstantial gaps without compromising well-being [77,78], unlike overwhelming frustration and discomfort due to severe deficiencies in essential digital resources during sudden virtualization [27,31,48]. Likewise, during stable periods, personal issues that temporarily affect academic focus have limited impact, which can be mitigated by spiritual or social coping strategies [73,80]. Therefore, contrary to the negative influence on mental well-being observed from overwhelming subjective experiences during the pandemic [18,20,23,28,30,44], in typical situations, academic activities trigger protective mechanisms against temporary distress without causing significant collective mood effects.

4.3. A Comparison of the Impact on Psychological Well-Being during and after the Pandemic

Concerning the second objective of this study, the data obtained allowed us to identify disruptive factors during isolation that exacerbated stress and deteriorated mental well-being in students more severely than in conventional times [18,20,23,28,30,44]. Specifically, the sudden educational transition [21,27,31], the alteration of dynamics and training environments [31,79], technological and environmental limitations [20,21,23,24,27,30,31,48], and a marked imbalance between vital areas due to confinement [18,20,28,30] showed a

recurrent association in research with disruptive emotional manifestations such as anxiety, burnout, loneliness, and existential distress in college students during quarantines. However, in stable scenarios, the optional incorporation of digital resources [74], minor concentration deficits [80], and occasionally personal problems regarding academic performance [73,80] denoted limited impacts on subjective well-being, which were mitigated by the activation of support strategies available before the pandemic [77,78,80].

During the virtualization forced by physical distancing restrictions during the pandemic, college students' psychological well-being was consistently associated with feelings of a lack of control, helplessness, incompetence, and general physical and emotional fatigue. These factors led to anxious symptoms, depressive disorders, and acute distress among students subjected to confinement. Such a relationship between disruptive external factors and severe subjective distress agrees with psychoeducational perspectives that explain this response when coping skills are surpassed in situations that are perceived as threatening by exceeding internal resources [6,26]. Likewise, the specialized literature highlights the protective role of close support networks to reduce the impact on mood regulation during periods of high demand, such as the academic year. Its drastic limitation during quarantines would partly explain the emotional overflow that led to burnout and educational apathy among students despite the gradual return to in-person attendance [19,46–49]. In contrast, post-pandemic scenarios show focused responses to limited stressors, mitigated by resources available in stable times. This allows us to conclude the markedly exceptional and unprecedented character that the educational experience of the college students exhibited during periods of isolation, whose mark on mental well-being still requires appropriate specialized support for its full restoration.

4.4. Limitations

Although this research followed a rigorous systematic search and screening in reference databases, such as Scopus and Web of Science, some methodological limitations were identified. Firstly, the exclusive use of these two databases constitutes a frequent restriction in systematic reviews that could be overcome by integrating other specialized repositories, such as EBSCO, ProQuest, or ScienceDirect, to expand the coverage of the scientific evidence examined.

The various approaches, measurements, and indicators used in the primary studies retrieved made it impossible to conduct a quantitative meta-analysis. As a result, our conclusions are limited to a qualitative integration and conceptual interpretation of the results from each investigation. In the future, reviews on this topic could focus on using more similar data sets to make statistical meta-syntheses possible.

Another aspect for improvement concerns the final sample of studies. Five articles initially identified could not be analyzed because their full texts were unavailable in open sources and were too expensive to obtain individually. Increasing institutional access would help reduce this limitation. Additionally, focusing on the 2020–2023 period meant that we did not consider research conducted before the COVID-19 pandemic, which could have provided valuable insights into the situation before the pandemic and enriched our comparative analysis.

Likewise, there is little representation of Latin American college students (8% of studies based in Brazil and Peru) compared to the predominance of Asian evidence (54% of works carried out in China). Greater geographic diversity would allow for more sensitive comparisons of contextual disparities.

Finally, the qualitative synthesis limits conclusions to conceptual and thematic interpretation, without being able to establish quantifiable differential effects of academic stress on psychological well-being between scenarios. Therefore, a meta-analysis on the topic in the future would allow for more robust and generalizable analyses.

4.5. Implications and Future Studies

At the theoretical level, the categorized results help validate the usefulness of explanatory models of academic stress based on an imbalance between environmental demands and coping resources. These results provide evidence of the severe impact on the psychological well-being of college students during strict confinements and emergency remote education. They also support the existing literature about the consequences of prolonged social distancing on mood regulation skills in the face of multiple chronic stressors.

Regarding the implications, this study contributes to our understanding of the relationship between academic stress and psychological well-being during the pandemic. It identified specific factors that made students' mental health worse during forced isolation. These findings provide a strong basis for further research and an elaboration of more comprehensive theoretical models to understand how college students are affected during crises.

On a practical level, the results highlight the need for higher education institutions to implement comprehensive plans of socio-emotional support for students, focused on mitigating the regulatory alterations that persist after the pandemic and strengthening their ability to withstand future situations of high academic demand. In this sense, studies are needed to evaluate psychoeducational programs and pedagogical strategies aimed at reducing the prevalence of psychological distress among college students after the exceptional nature of COVID-19.

Regarding the benefits for the university environment and public health, identifying the specific variables that compromise the well-being of students during critical educational disruptions allows universities to design interventions focused on the factors with the greatest impact, optimizing the available resources. Likewise, by addressing mental health deterioration in the student population on time, potential long-term complications that could impact quality of life and future job performance are prevented, reducing the load on public health systems.

Regarding future studies, quantitative research can be conducted to compare the prevalence of anxious, depressive, and academic burnout symptoms in college students before, during, and after the pandemic. Likewise, causality studies that determine the impact of stress caused by academic conditions on the satisfaction or well-being of college students in Latin America should be extended since the number of studies conducted in this region is smaller than in other regions.

5. Conclusions

The primary goal of this review study was to identify the factors contributing to academic stress and their impacts on the psychological well-being of college students inside and outside the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. This study identified five categories of disruptive factors that intensified negative emotional experiences for students undergoing remote education during the lockdown. Among these factors were the sudden educational transition, forced digital modalities, technological and environmental deficiencies, and the imbalance between demand and satisfaction of needs, which exhibited repeated associations with anxiety, apathy, burnout, and dissatisfaction, among other symptoms that, together, overwhelmed internal resources to adapt and preserve well-being. This allows us to conclude that the combination of various factors weakened the regulatory abilities of college students during the period of isolation. This led to psycho-emotional consequences that are still lingering after in-person attendance has resumed, as indicated by specialized studies in the literature.

When considering the factors related to academic stress and their impact on psychological well-being outside of pandemic situations, it is important to note the influence of effective time management for studying with technological support, the gradual shift toward virtual educational content, and personal issues that can temporarily affect focused attention. These factors were balanced by utilizing resources such as self-confidence, resilience, and spiritual support strategies in normal situations. This suggests that during

stable periods, academic dynamics tend to trigger protective mechanisms that maintain students' basic levels of satisfaction and mental well-being in response to temporary increases in perceived stress.

Likewise, the second objective was to verify the differences in the psychological well-being of these students associated with the academic stress experienced in both scenarios. Concerning the objective of comparing the impacts of academic stress on psychological well-being inside and outside of COVID-19 situations, this study showed a deep contrast when comparing the categories and factors found in both groups of published studies. During the pandemic, significant disruptive factors strained regulatory abilities and led to severe emotional consequences. These were consistently observed during the pandemic. In non-pandemic contexts, the identified variables indicated occasional localized distress, which was mitigated by protective mechanisms available before the crisis. This divergence allowed us to conclude that the sudden educational virtualization had a significantly more adverse and profound impact on students' perceptions, capabilities, and coping resources to manage their well-being compared to the responses observed in conventional contexts.

Supplementary Materials: The record of the study selection process and data recovery for evidence synthesis can be viewed at https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1cH8UsyogCjTwwvkOn_bWF7Rm4uVDRlaU/edit?usp=sharing&ouid=101226118637598475441&rtpof=true&sd=true (accessed on 1 June 2024).

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