

How COVID-19 Concerns Have Changed Over Time

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Introduction

- The overall purpose of this study is to understand how Covid-19 perceptions have changed over time. Investigating the causes of these perceptual changes can help us interpret our data and what it means for college students and university policy.
- Based on findings from Aknin et al. (2022) and Fruehwirth et al. (2021), the current study goal was to record data from students at the University of San Diego. With all of the initial fear and uncertainty then transitioning to the creation of multiple vaccines and masking policy implementation, many factors have contributed to the significance of this pandemic.
- Misinformation and mental health are also key components which have become prevalent discussion topics amongst college students. We hypothesized that there would be more distress related to the pandemic initially which would decrease and eventually plateau following vaccination distribution and the decline of cases.
- We selected these three specific semesters to study because we had the most data to work with. Additionally, the state of the world amidst the pandemic and government policies were different at each of the timepoints which made for an interesting, more comprehensive comparison of how Covid-19 perceptions have changed over time.

References

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8. SONA Software Systems

Methods

Participants included liberal arts college students enrolled in Introduction to Psychology who received course credit for their participation. They completed online self-report measures across three Fall semester sessions (Fall 2022, Fall 2021 and Fall 2020).

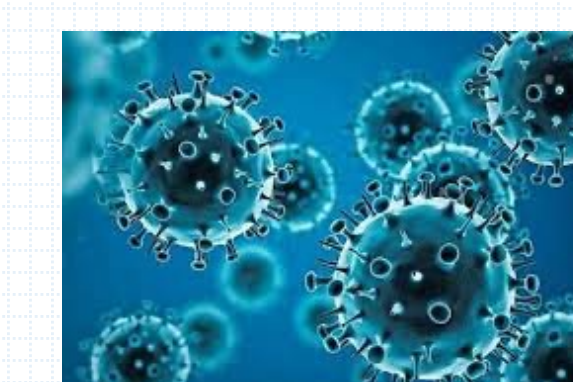
Of the 301 respondents, 143 participated in Fall 2020, 61 from Fall 2021 and 97 from Fall 2022. A total of 75.7% had not yet declared a major. A total of 79.4% identified as female (20.3 as male and .3 as gender nonconforming). They were mostly first year (66.8%) and second year (23.6%) students (4.7% were Juniors and 5.0% were Seniors). They had an average age of 18.60 (.87) years. A total of 56.1% were residents of California, 39.5% were residents from another state and 4.3% were international students. A total of 56.8% identified as White, followed by Hispanic (17.3%), Asian American (13.3%), African American (2.3%), Native American (.3%), Biracial (5%) and Other (5%). A total of 83.3% of participants reported knowing someone who was formally diagnosed with Covid-19. Participants completed a series of questionnaires that measured background information, fears and concerns of Covid-19, distress (depression, anxiety, stress) relative to the prior year, and attitudes about telemental health interventions.

Results

For purposes of this study, the outcome variables of interest included a composite score for levels of anxiety, stress and depression from 12 months ago to the time of the self-report on a measure developed by the PI for this study. Specifically, participants were asked: “Think about this same month 12 months ago (pre-Covid-19) when you respond to these statements below. Please choose the best response for each statement. Compared to how I felt 12 months ago....”

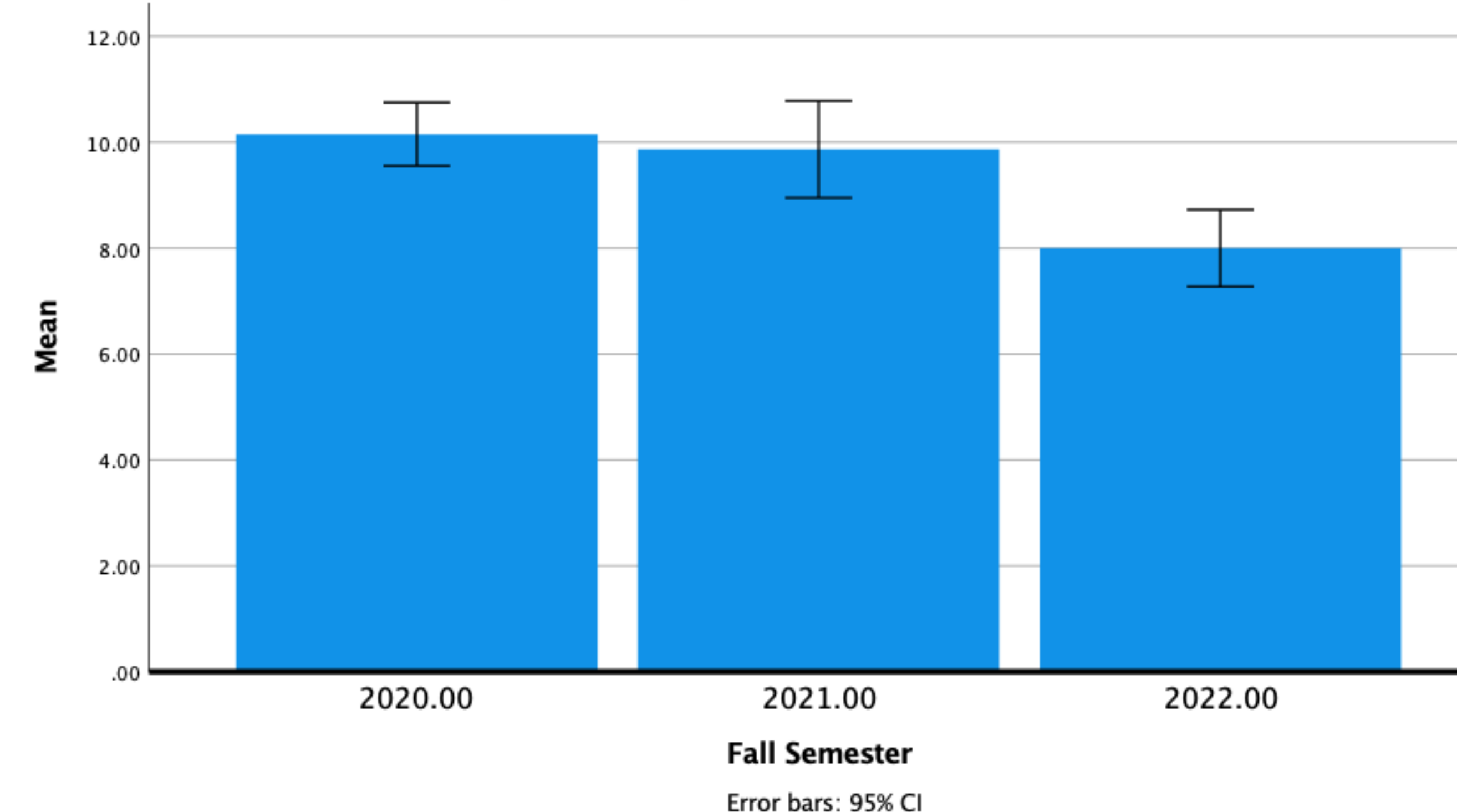
And they were asked to respond on a 5 point Likert like scale (*not at all true to very true*) to: “Overall, recently, I have more symptoms of anxiety.” with a corresponding item for depression and stress. The three items were added to create one total distress score. Overall, across all three semesters, participants reported an average stress level of 9.40 ($SD = 3.74$).

Results using one-way ANOVA showed a main effect for fall semester by overall distress, $F(2, 298) = 10.81, p < .001$. Tukey post hoc tests found significant differences between the three groups, specifically between 2020 and 2022 ($p < .001$) and from 2021 to 2022 ($p = .002$) but not between 2020 to 2021 ($N.S.$). See Figure 1 below.



Results

Figure 1. Change in Distress Across Year



Discussion

As hypothesized, these results showed a change in level of distress across time. There are a few notable research studies which have supported our results. Aknin et al. (2022), Fruehwirth et al. (2021), and Gallegos et al. (2021) all came to similar conclusions regarding how stress impacted individuals during the pandemic. The strengths of our study include having more than one time point, a large sample size, and survey accessibility for students. The limitations of our study include having a singular measure of distress, a differing sample size across the year, and having results confined to only the University of San Diego student population. For future research, we suggest extending this survey to other colleges, particularly ones which implemented different Covid-19 policies to see if there is a correlation between policy implementation and student distress levels. Additionally, it would be helpful to have multiple measures of distress, including ones that are standardized with normative data. It would also be beneficial for the researchers to have the same sample size at all time points used so as not to skew study results. Through support for recovery, treatment and care, distress prevention, and positive mental health promotion, we can help mitigate the lingering effects of Covid-19 induced distress.