

# Vietnamese university students' perspective on Peter Pan Syndrome

## Research Article

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### Abstract

An increasing number of people, especially university students, are presenting Peter Pan Syndrome in society. Peter Pan Syndrome is a concept used to characterize the person who refuses to comply with the characteristics of the adult when reaching adulthood. The people with Peter Pan Syndrome are immature in emotion, behavior, and cognition. The main objective is to investigate the perception of Peter Pan Syndrome and the level of Peter Pan Syndrome among university students. Convenience sampling was used to collect data from 400 undergraduate students (186 males and 214 females) from three universities in Vietnam. Descriptive and inferential statistics were used to analyze the data. The results revealed that the manifestations of Peter Pan Syndrome in students in three dimensions of emotion, behavior, and cognition. This study contributes to the general discussion underway about the definition of Peter Pan Syndrome and the symptoms of Peter Pan Syndrome. Future research should carefully consider the potential effects of Peter Pan Syndrome among undergraduate students to assist families and educators in developing appropriate education and coping strategies.

**Key Words:** Peter Pan Syndrome, University students, Emotion, Behavior, Cognition.

### Introduction

Many researchers have studied the maturity of people in recent years, especially among university students, which has piqued the interest of many psychologists. The term "Emerging adulthood" was characterized by no longer adolescents but have not yet become adults or between puberty and adulthood (1). According to the study of Wider, Low (2), adulthood is an important period in the human life span, change in behaviors and perceptions of themselves and others. The transition to adulthood developed by Wall, Law (3) involved changes in biological or cognitive dimensions and the establishment of goal-directed and social relationships. Psychological determiners were considered to be important in the transition to adulthood (4). The manifestation of students delaying their transition into adulthood has been a common issue today. The concept of people who do not want to grow up was called Peter Pan Syndrome. There have a large number of researchers has studied this subject, including Peter Pan Syndrome in marriage (5); man's Peter Pan Syndrome with adolescent mothers' intimate relationships (6); Peter Pan Syndrome among mountain climbers (7); Peter Pan Syndrome in churches (8); the

phenomenon of Peter Pan Syndrome in adult man (9); Peter Pan Syndrome among anorexia nervosa patients (10).

The study of Kiley (11) has suggested that the concept "Peter Pan Syndrome" has recently gained popularity as a metaphor for "men who have never grown up". Some previous studies revealed the manifestation of a person who has Peter Pan Syndrome that person who refuse to comply with the characteristics of the adult when reaching adulthood Kiley (11); they are unable to cope with adult emotions and responsibilities, difficulty in social and professional relationships and behave childish characterized (9, 12); staying a child and sustaining the parents' protection (13), postponing between childhood and adulthood (10). Quadrio (1982) described the concept "Peter Pan Syndrome" as a man married who is immature, narcissistic, and unfaithful. The syndrome can appear among young men such as undergraduate students, who are dynamic in school activities and independent from their parents. However, they tend to resist committing to long-term relationships. In addition, the term of "Peter Pan Syndrome" described people who yearn for independence, are brave in facing danger. However, they are panic-stricken by maturity, suffer from narcissism, and unable to create mature interpersonal relationships with the opposite sex in daily life (14). Didevar conducted a previous study revealed that Peter Pan Syndrome is a disorder in which an individual has the physical appearance of an adult but retains the mental, emotional and psychological outlook of a child. They tend to avoid taking responsibilities and competencies of adulthood. In today, Peter Pan

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Syndrome has become a common topic of discussion. People are becoming increasingly immature, preferring to satisfy their own needs for fulfillment rather than putting in an effort to create long-term relationships with others (7).

Several scientific studies have been conducted on the origins of Peter Pan Syndrome, including family environment, parenting styles, stresses in modern society. An individual has been living in parental unhappiness such as parents' dissatisfaction with their marriage and themselves, a lack of emotional warmth and sharing..., all of which affect an individual in different ways. In addition, people between the ages of from 18 to 22 must tackle and address magical thinking and marginal ego development. Those people still are trapped in Peter Pan Syndrome for an extended period if they do not overcome this process (11). According to Ortega (15), the factor affecting Peter Pan Syndrome among young people is the parents' overprotection or scare of loneliness. The people have not developed the necessary skills to confront life. Children with overcontrolling or intrusive parenting may be less able to manage emotions, orient their behaviors in the school setting, resulting in greater maladjustment across social, academic, and emotional domains (16).

The study of Kiley (11) revealed that there are six symptoms and social stress which act as domination the emotion, behavior, perception, belief systems, spirits of individuals suffering from Peter Pan Syndrome including irresponsibility, anxiety, loneliness, sex role conflict, narcissism and chauvinism, a piratical lifestyle. Individuals fail to learn basic self-care skills, prioritize issues, and care for themselves due to their parents' overprotection. They are irresponsible and unconscionable foul deeds. Besides, they easily blame others for their mistakes and break promises. They desperately want to find a place where they belong. They need friends and they are afraid of being alone, but they are extremely self-centered. However, people have difficulties in interpersonal relationships because of their desire to seek perfection. They have poor self-confidence.

Moreover, people with Peter Pan syndrome have magical thinking that takes them away from reality. They find it difficult to express their emotions and cope with life's disappointments, making them vulnerable. In order to defend themselves from this vulnerability, they prefer to confront all with "I don't care" attitude as a defense against criticism. They prefer to resist commitment relationships in loving relationships. According to the study of Quadrio (5), people with Peter Pan Syndrome tend to have instability in their career issues, same as their loving relationships. They desperately want a job, but they refuse to work for it because they don't take responsibility for their actions. In addition, the research of Dalla, Marchetti (6) indicated that husbands with Peter Pan Syndrome were unable to establish a close relationship with their wives, was not emotionally involved in the relationship, and refused to work. In Vietnam, few scientific studies have been conducted about Peter Pan Syndrome, especially with the participants being university students.

However, several studies have concentrated on the criteria to evaluate personal development in social work among undergraduate students so far such as (17-19).

Based on the findings of previous studies and psychologists' viewings, our research conduct to study Peter Pan Syndrome with symptoms including difficulty expressing emotions; postponing decision making; difficulty in forming and maintaining relationships with friends and lovers, irresponsibility, blaming others, without pushing themselves, staying motivated, and losing interest at work; avoiding commitment; feelings of anger and guilt with parents and want to be closer to parents. This paper aims to fill this gap by exploring and measuring university students' perceptions of Peter Pan Syndrome in Ho Chi Minh, Vietnam.

## Methods

### Participants

Participants were selected randomly from three-member universities in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. All participants provided informed consent after receiving an explanation of the purpose of the research. The survey instrument was distributed to 450 undergraduate students, of which 400 questionnaires returned, including males accounted for 46.5% (n=186), and females accounted for 53.5% (n=214).

**Table 1: An overview of the survey participants**

		n	%
Gender	Male	186	46.5
	Female	214	53.5
School	HUTECH University	122	30.5
	Nguyen Tat Thanh University	124	31.0
	Ho Chi Minh City University of Education	154	38.5
Academic Year	Freshman	53	13.3
	Sophomore	172	43.0
	Junior	147	36.8
	Senior	28	7.0
GPA	Outstanding	36	9.0
	Very good	52	13.0
	Good	227	56.8
	Average	78	19.5
	Pass	7	1.8
Birth Order	Oldest child	172	43.0
	Middle child	60	15.0
	Youngest child	121	30.3
	Only child	47	11.8

### Measurement

The questionnaire was designed to survey university students from the universities in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. First, social-demographic items were introduced in the questionnaire. Then, university students were measured by the questionnaire about emotion, cognition, and behavior. The instrument consists of four-part involves in: Part I containing

questions about the university students' perception of the problems relating to their maturity; Part II containing questions about the manifestation of Peter Pan Syndrome in university students in the dimension of cognition; Part III containing questions about the manifestation of Peter Pan Syndrome in university students in emotional dimension; Part IV containing questions about the manifestation of Peter Pan Syndrome in university students in the dimension of behavior. Then, students were interviewed to collect data.

### Procedures

Participants were provided informed consent and an explanation of the purpose of the study before participation. In the beginning, participants are required to complete the General Information form, including the school's name, school year, gender, GPA, birth order. Subsequently, the instructions of the scale were introduced to undergraduate students to understand the questionnaire.

## Results

As is shown in Table 2 below, Peter Pan Syndrome manifests cognitively in university students.

**Table 2: The manifestation of Peter Pan Syndrome in university students in the cognitive dimension**

	Level				
	Totally Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Totally Disagree
Thinking that living for the day will be okay without thinking of tomorrow.	5.0	6.0	10.5	42.5	36.0
Thinking that being free, footloose, and fancy-free will be better than having a permanent job.	4.8	14.5	24.5	39.3	17.0
Thinking that one must have big dreams in life.	10.8	39.5	25.5	18.0	6.3
Thinking that something goes wrong, just be quiet in the discussion, leave home, or shut myself in the room.	2.3	5.8	11.0	55.0	26.0
Thinking that learning is unimportant; hence they drop out of school easily.	0.8	10.0	5.5	49.3	34.5
Thinking that some subjects were failed causes me to pay more attention to learning.	3.5	9.5	7.5	37.0	42.5
Thinking that studying is the most boring things I have to.	2.3	4.3	14.5	47.3	31.8
Thinking that the purpose of learning is unnecessary.	2.5	4.5	10.3	52.3	30.5
Thinking that the promise for people does not need to make.	1.0	5.5	4.8	39.0	49.8
Thinking that this life does not necessarily be a long-term commitment in relationships with friends and lovers.	2.3	11.8	13.3	39.5	33.3
Thinking that there is no need to listen to those who have some difference of opinion.	2.0	5.5	17.5	49.0	26.0
Thinking that hurting and retaliating against others are common.	1.5	4.3	14.0	39.8	40.5
Thinking that centre of attention is the important thing.	2.0	11.8	25.8	42.3	18.3
Thinking that money can buy love.	2.3	9.3	14.5	35.3	38.8
The partner must indulge and take care of me from little things.	4.0	12.5	15.5	44.8	23.3
Thinking that the lover must obey and praise me.	2.8	7.5	17.5	48.0	24.3
Thinking about whatever happened, I always put myself first in any situation.	7.8	14.8	27.8	35.8	14.0

The findings in Table 2 shows 10.8% that students totally agreed and 39.5% of students agree with the view "Thinking that one must have big dreams in life"; followed by 7.8% of students totally agreed and 14.8% students agreed with the view "Thinking whatever happened, I always put myself first in any situation".

**Table 3: The manifestation of Peter Pan Syndrome in university students in the emotional dimension**

	Level				
	Very Frequently	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely	Never
I usually feel keyed up and scared without knowing the aetiology.	5.8	10.3	47.3	28.3	8.5
Lack of self-confidence.	7.5	23.0	48.5	18.5	2.5
I usually scold myself.	5.8	22.3	40.0	25.5	6.5
It is difficult to control emotions and emotional explosions.	10.3	13.0	38.3	32.5	6.0
It is challenging to express emotions with others.	10.5	22.5	37.3	22.8	7.0
Worrying about the ability to concentrate.	7.5	23.5	37.8	25.5	5.8
Fear and difficulty talking to high-status people.	6.0	16.3	32.5	33.3	12.0
Lack of self-confidence in decision-making if there are no parents' agreement/consent.	4.3	7.3	27.0	36.0	25.5

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Feeling keyed up when being with family.	0.8	3.0	12.0	16.0	68.3
Feeling unhappy because of without getting along with my parents.	2.5	7.8	15.5	18.3	56.0
I am always comfortable and happy with others but lonely deep inside.	17.0	17.8	35.0	19.5	10.8
When no one besides me is sad, so I want someone by my side.	11.3	18.3	29.5	23.3	17.8
They communicate widely, but there are no close friends to confide in and open my heart.	11.8	18.3	29.3	22.0	18.8
Be unable to get along with others of the same age and sex.	3.3	6.8	23.3	34.5	32.3
Doing some activities to relieve sadness.	14.8	19.5	32.0	22.5	11.3
Be unhappy with seeing me as a family member.	0.8	2.3	6.8	8.0	82.3

Table 3 represents the primary manifestations of students in emotional dimension with three levels ranging from (very frequently to occasionally) as below: “Lack of self-confidence” with 7.5% (very frequently), 23.0% (frequently), 48.5% (occasionally); followed by “It is difficult to express emotions with others” with 10.5% (very frequently), 22.5% (frequently), 37.3% (occasionally); “I am always comfortable and happy with others, but lonely deep inside” with 17.0% (very frequently), 17.8% (frequently), 35.0% (occasionally); “I usually scold myself” with 5.8% (very frequently), 22.3% (frequently), 40.0% (occasionally); “Doing some activities to relieve sadness” with 14.8% (very frequently), 19.5% (frequently), 32.0% (occasionally); “Worrying about the ability to concentrate” with 7.5% (very frequently), 23.5% (frequently), 37.8% (occasionally).

**Table 4: The manifestation of Peter Pan Syndrome in university students in self-consciousness dimension**

	Level				
	Very Frequently	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely	Never
I do not want to be considered a weak person, so I try to be strong all the time.	10.3	22.5	26.3	21.0	20.0
Proving I am the perfect person.	3.5	8.8	27.0	31.3	29.5
It is easy to satisfy when others praise me.	4.5	18.3	33.0	29.0	15.3
Highly appreciating my job and assuming that other people's job is unimportant.	1.8	5.3	10.5	32.0	50.5
Do not listen to other people's views when there has some difference of opinion.	2.8	3.8	18.5	36.3	38.8
I am gifted but others do not appoint me in the important post.	2.5	4.0	24.3	34.8	34.5
Be unable to identify my strengths and weaknesses.	5.5	21.8	31.5	25.0	16.3
I do not want to compare myself to others to study.	10.5	8.8	24.5	28.5	27.8
I am not ashamed of being considered a child.	18.8	19.0	24.0	22.0	16.3
I always turn to someone because I am afraid of facing sadness alone.	6.8	17.0	23.5	29.0	23.8
Doing some activities to relieve sadness.	18.8	20.8	23.3	22.8	14.5

Table 4 indicates the primary manifestations of students in self-consciousness dimension with three levels ranging from (very frequently to occasionally) as below: "I am not ashamed of being considered a child" with 18.8% (very frequently), 19.0% (frequently), 24.0% (occasionally); followed by "Be unable to identify my strengths and weaknesses" with 5.5% (very frequently), 21.8% (frequently), 31.5% (occasionally); "I do not want to be considered a weak person, so I try to be strong all the time" with 10.3% (very frequently), 22.5% (frequently), 26.3% (occasionally); and "It is easy to satisfy when I am praised by others" with 4.5% (very frequently), 18.3% (frequently), 33.0% (occasionally).

**Table 5: The manifestation of Peter Pan Syndrome in university students in dimension of worldviews and belief systems**

Worldviews and belief systems	Right		Wrong	
	n	%	n	%
I need to express self-beliefs in life.	382	95.5%	18	4.5%
Setting clear goals and making life plans.	376	94%	24	6.0%
Keeping our self-esteem always.	347	86.8%	53	13.3%
Calculating productivity and efficiency (financial management, expenditure organization).	319	79.8%	81	20.3%
Dare to think, dare to act, and dare to take risks.	329	82.3%	71	17.8%
Striving for a permanent job and promotion in the future.	371	92.8%	29	7.3%
Be active and positive to learn more soft skills, computer skills, and foreign languages.	350	87.5%	50	12.5%

Table 5 represents that 20.3% of students supposed the view of "Calculating productivity and efficiency (financial management, expenditure organization)" was wrong. With 17.8% of university students supposed that the

view of "Dare to think, dare to act, and dare to take risks", 13.3% of "Keeping our self-esteem always", 12.5% of "Be active and positive to learn more soft skills, computer skills, and foreign languages" was wrong.

**Table 6: The manifestation of Peter Pan Syndrome in university students in spirit dimension**

	Level				
	Very Frequently	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely	Never
I was constantly immersed in my unusual thoughts.	11.0	20.5	29.8	26.3	12.5
Impulsive behavior and hard to control leading to extreme words and actions.	4.0	12.5	28.3	39.0	16.3
I do not want to care about the hard problems at present.	2.5	8.8	34.8	30.5	23.5
It is easy to quit a job or to study when something goes wrong.	2.5	4.8	28.0	40.8	24.0
Even if there are no difficulties in life, I do not want to try anymore.	1.5	8.5	20.3	33.3	36.5
Constantly changing part-time jobs or study groups.	3.0	8.5	16.5	31.8	40.3
I am lazy to do household chores or take care of myself.	5.0	10.5	25.0	29.8	29.8
I do not dare to express my feelings to others.	8.5	19.0	31.0	25.5	16.0
I am reluctant and unable to make decisions when needed.	6.3	20.3	34.0	26.0	13.5

Table 6 indicates the primary manifestations of students in spiritual dimension with three levels ranging from (very frequently to occasionally) as below: "I constantly immersed in my unusual thoughts" with 11.0% (very frequently), 20.5% (frequently), 29.8% (occasionally); followed by "I do not dare to express my feelings to others" with 8.5% (very frequently), 19.0% (frequently), 31.0% (occasionally); and "I am reluctant and unable to make decisions when needed" with 6.3% (very frequently), 20.3% (frequently), 34.0% (occasionally).

**Table 7: The manifestation of Peter Pan Syndrome in university students in the dimension of social relationships**

	Level				
	Very Frequently	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely	Never
Telling a lie in relationships.	3.5	6.0	32.5	38.3	19.8
Refuse to take responsibility in working groups.	2.0	3.8	9.5	37.5	47.3
Blaming teachers (superiors) when something went wrong in studying (or working).	0.5	5.3	17.3	31.8	45.3
Talking about "male chauvinism" (or vice versa).	0.5	3.5	6.3	17.3	72.5
I cannot strike up a friendship with people of the opposite sex because they are bad guys.	1.8	9.5	16.0	25.3	47.5
I want to fall in love quickly when meeting a someone but after that, I want to break up.	1.5	6.5	13.8	19.5	58.8
I easily get angry with comments on myself from others.	2.8	10.3	27.5	33.3	26.3
Relying on the family to take care of money issues.	15.3	28.5	28.5	14.5	13.3
Spending much time playing games rather than meeting and making friends.	7.0	15.0	28.3	22.8	27.0
Letting other people, especially parents or the lover, take care of me from little things.	3.5	10.8	19.0	34.0	32.8
Escaping from responsibilities in a romantic relationship.	1.5	3.5	16.0	26.5	52.5
Saying something bad about my friends.	4.0	4.3	20.3	39.3	32.3
Be willing to give up on relationship with friends if I do not like anymore.	6.5	9.5	30.3	28.3	25.5
Blaming family for my success.	2.0	3.0	12.5	19.3	63.3
Tormenting my family by acting like a child.	2.3	5.5	8.0	23.5	60.8

Table 7 indicates the primary manifestations of students in the dimension of social relationships with three levels ranging from (very frequently to occasionally) as below: "Relying on the family to take care of money issues" with 15.3% (very frequently), 28.5% (frequently), and 28.5% (occasionally).

## Discussion

The study's objectives were to explore the perception of Peter Pan Syndrome and the level of Peter Pan Syndrome among university students. The findings showed that university students' perspective about the cognitive dimension was neutral: they think they must have big dreams in life and always put themselves first

in any situation. This is considered that having dreams or goals in life is an important factor for people, especially among undergraduate students. Hence, having appropriate goals is one of the factors affecting students' decisions in the future. This is an aspect in which students should be taught to orient themselves properly.

The emotional manifestations of Peter Pan Syndrome in students include lack of self-confidence and difficulty expressing emotions with others. I am always comfortable and happy with others, but lonely deep inside with the highest total of three levels of very frequent, frequently, and occasionally were 80%. This finding ties well with previous studies (11, 15), which revealed that people with Peter Pan Syndrome found it difficult to express their emotions with others and lack self-confidence.

The manifestation of Peter Pan Syndrome in students in the dimension of behavior include self-consciousness, worldviews and belief systems; spirit; and social relationships. The findings showed four primary manifestations that students frequently experienced in the self-consciousness dimension, including I do not want to be considered a weak person, so I try to be strong all the time; it is easy to satisfy when others praise me; I cannot identify my own strengths and weaknesses, and I am not ashamed of being considered a child. In addition, the manifestation of Peter Pan Syndrome was obviously shown in students in the dimension of worldviews and belief systems involve in keeping our self-esteem always; calculating productivity and efficiency; care to think, dare to act, and dare to take risks; and be active and positive to learn more soft skills, computer skills, and foreign languages. There are small numbers of students who have yet reached adulthood. They find it difficult to take risks and self-assessment, lack professional interest, and are completely intolerant towards any criticism.

From the results, there were three primary manifestations of Peter Pan Syndrome in university students in spirit dimension ranging from very frequently to occasionally level such as I constantly immersed in my unusual thoughts, I do not have the courage to express my feelings to others, I am reluctant and unable to make decisions when needed. These results line with the previous report Kiley (11) showed that university students with Peter Pan Syndrome had magical thinking. The main manifestation of students in the dimension of social relationships ranging from very frequently to occasionally level was Relying on the family to take care of money issues.

There are several limitations to this approach. One limitation is found in this case: the sampling process from three universities in Ho Chi Minh City might limit the generalization of the results through the other university students. Therefore, the greater number of university students should be expanded to other universities and areas in Vietnam for potential study in the future. Another limitation in this study involves the issue of sampling and self-reported measurements, which also contribute to being biased in the findings and being a cross-sectional analysis that did not allow us to have accurate results. In order to take these limitations into account, a longitudinal study would be much more expedient for better observation of university students' perceptions of Peter Pan Syndrome in different contexts.

## Conclusion

Peter Pan Syndrome is considered a phenomenon that person who refuses to comply with the characteristics of the adult when reaching adulthood. They cannot cope with adult emotions and responsibilities, have difficulty in social and professional relationships and behave childish characterized when they reach adulthood. This symptom was examined in university students. Importantly, our results provide additional information about the symptoms and manifestation of Peter Pan Syndrome in three dimensions: cognition, emotion, and behavior. As a recommendation, this provides a good starting point for further discussion and further research. Future research should consider the potential factors affecting Peter Pan Syndrome in students and investigate the level of this syndrome among university students more carefully. Besides, future research could aim to replicate results in larger sample sizes or in other universities in Vietnam to examine factors influencing Peter Pan Syndrome.

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