

Exploring the Relationship between Psychological Self-Care Practices and Occupational Stress among Vocational College Teachers in Kuching, Sarawak

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Abstract

This study explores the relationship between psychological self-care practices and occupational stress among vocational college teachers in Kuching, Malaysia. Teachers in Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET). A quantitative correlational research design was employed. Data were collected from 112 teachers across two vocational colleges in Kuching using a validated self-report instrument that included the Vocational Teacher Self Care Assessment Tool (VT SCAT) and a standard occupational stress scale. Participants were selected through convenience sampling, which limits generalizability but allows initial insight into a specific population. Descriptive statistics and Pearson correlation analyses were conducted to examine the association between psychological self-care and stress indicators. Results indicate that while self-care levels were moderate in both workplace and personal domains, stress levels were generally low among participants. Notably, the study found no statistically significant correlation between self-care practices and stress levels. However, a strong positive correlation was observed between self-care at work and in personal life. These findings contribute to the broader discussion on teacher wellbeing by highlighting the complexity of stress management in vocational education. The study underscores the need for systemic interventions, including supportive institutional policies, targeted wellness programs, and stress management training. These measures may better equip educators to navigate professional challenges while maintaining their mental health and teaching effectiveness.

Keywords: Psychological Self-Care, Occupational Stress, Vocational Teachers, TVET, Teacher Well-Being

Introduction

Teachers in the Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) sector play a multifaceted role in preparing students for the demands of the evolving job market. Beyond delivering technical knowledge, they are also expected to stay abreast of industry trends, manage practical training sessions, and meet institutional performance standards. These expectations often contribute to elevated levels of occupational stress, which may affect both teachers' well-being and educational outcomes. While Rajamanickam et al. (2024) highlight the growing expectations placed on TVET educators to adapt to technological change, Wilson et al. (2023) emphasize the emotional toll of such responsibilities on teaching performance. Together, these studies underline the urgent need to examine the mental health and well-being of vocational educators, yet few synthesize these findings in a context-specific manner.

There is increasing recognition that teacher well-being significantly influences instructional quality, student motivation and overall institutional effectiveness. However, broad generalizations such as “teachers carry a heavy responsibility” or “teaching is a high-pressure profession,” while commonly cited, require deeper analysis grounded in empirical findings. For example, research shows that high levels of teacher stress are associated with burnout, absenteeism and attrition which can disrupt student learning and strain institutional resources (MacIntyre et al., 2020; Pau et al., 2020). These outcomes are particularly concerning in TVET settings, where the loss of experienced instructors may hinder skill-based instruction and industry alignment.

Various interventions aimed at reducing teacher stress such as mindfulness training, professional development programs and resilience-building workshops have gained traction in the literature. Initiatives like the CARE (Cultivating Awareness and Resilience in Education) program have demonstrated positive outcomes, including improved emotional regulation and classroom dynamics (Jennings et al., 2017; Tarrasch et al., 2020). However, most of these studies have been conducted in general education environments, with little focus on their applicability within vocational contexts. This raises questions about whether such interventions are effective or even appropriate for educators managing workshop-based learning, safety regulations and the dual academic-industry demands unique to TVET institutions.

Stress among teachers is shaped by various factors, including workload, lack of institutional support, difficult student behaviour and administrative expectations (Navickienė et al., 2019). While such stressors are not unique to vocational education, the specific context of TVET—where instructors often juggle teaching with industry certifications, resource constraints and evolving curriculum standards—adds another layer of complexity. Yet, few empirical studies have focused on how these stressors manifest in vocational settings in Malaysia. Local reports by the Ministry of Education, as well as policy reviews on teacher workload, suggest that TVET teachers face increasing demands with limited support systems, but these insights are rarely incorporated into scholarly research.

A further concern lies in how self-care is conceptualised in the context of teaching. While the present study initially used the term “self-care psychology,” this phrase lacks clear definition within established academic frameworks. A more precise and widely accepted term is “psychological self-care,” which refers to intentional strategies that individuals use to

maintain emotional stability, manage stress and protect their mental health (Posluns & Gall, 2020). In educational psychology, psychological self-care includes practices such as setting emotional boundaries, engaging in reflective thinking and seeking social or professional support—practices that are especially critical for teachers in high-demand environments.

Despite growing interest in self-care and mental well-being among teachers, the intersection of these topics remains underexplored in the vocational education context. Much of the existing literature focuses on primary and secondary school teachers or higher education faculty, leaving a gap in understanding the unique stressors and coping strategies relevant to TVET educators, particularly in Malaysia. Moreover, limited data exist on how self-care practices influence stress levels among vocational college teachers, or whether these strategies are effective in reducing psychological strain in real-world school settings.

Given these limitations, this study aims to investigate the relationship between psychological self-care practices and occupational stress among vocational college teachers in Kuching. By focusing on a specific population and using validated tools, this research seeks to provide new insights into how self-care contributes to teacher well-being within the unique demands of the Malaysian TVET landscape. It addresses a critical gap in the literature and offers implications for institutional policies, teacher training programs and broader efforts to support sustainable teaching careers in vocational education.

Literature Reviews

Psychological self-care refers to the intentional practices individuals use to maintain emotional stability, manage stress, and support their mental well-being. In educational psychology, this concept often includes cognitive strategies such as emotional regulation, reflective thinking, mindfulness and the establishment of healthy personal boundaries (Posluns & Gall, 2020). Although psychological self-care is sometimes discussed alongside physical and emotional self-care, it is important to distinguish these constructs for clarity. Emotional self-care focuses on understanding and processing emotions, while physical self-care pertains to maintaining bodily health through sleep, nutrition and physical activity. For the purpose of this study, the emphasis is placed on psychological self-care, particularly as it relates to mental wellness in the teaching profession.

Studies show that educators who actively engage in psychological self-care are more resilient and less likely to suffer from chronic stress or burnout (Martinez et al., 2020; Fosco et al., 2023). This is especially relevant for vocational teachers, who often encounter a unique set of demands including practical training responsibilities, compliance with industry standards and constant technological adaptation. While some literature touches on general wellness interventions across populations (Gonzalez et al., 2023; Guler & Engin, 2023), the focus of this review is on teacher-centered research that examines stress and self-care in educational contexts. Including non-teaching populations without direct application weakens the relevance and focus of the discussion.

Research indicates that teacher stress is shaped by several interrelated factors, such as workload intensity, lack of emotional or institutional support, student behavioral challenges and administrative expectations (Nguyen, 2023; Kidger et al., 2016). These stressors can lead to emotional fatigue, job dissatisfaction and even decisions to leave the profession (Miller &

Flint-Stipp, 2019). However, while these factors are acknowledged across multiple studies, there is limited analytical synthesis on how different types of stress—such as acute versus chronic or personal versus occupational—interact with specific self-care practices. There is also a need for research that classifies these causes into broader domains to better understand their root drivers and potential solutions.

Institutional context plays a significant role in shaping teacher well-being. For instance, supportive leadership, positive school culture and professional development opportunities are frequently cited as buffers against stress (Jensen, 2020; Hohensee & Weber, 2022). Yet, studies often report these factors in isolation rather than as part of an interconnected system. A more structured synthesis would group literature into categories such as personal coping mechanisms, peer support networks and systemic or organizational interventions. This approach would enable deeper academic engagement and reflect the complexity of teacher experiences.

Barriers to effective self-care are well documented, but often under-analyzed. Teachers cite lack of time, emotional exhaustion and competing responsibilities as obstacles to maintaining regular self-care routines. Cultural expectations and feelings of guilt may further discourage prioritizing well-being, especially in environments where overwork is normalized (Hammerton, 2019). These individual and contextual challenges should be examined through behavioral and occupational health perspectives, rather than remaining anecdotal mentions. Furthermore, structural constraints—such as rigid performance metrics, curriculum overload and inadequate staffing—are rarely emphasized, despite their significant impact on teachers' ability to care for themselves.

To provide a deeper theoretical grounding, this review adopts the Conservation of Resources (COR) theory, which posits that individuals strive to obtain, retain and protect valuable resources, including time, energy, emotional stability and social support (Hollebeek et al., 2023). Stress occurs when these resources are threatened, depleted, or fail to yield expected returns (Lee et al., 2023). Within this framework, psychological self-care is a strategy for protecting personal resources, while institutional support functions as a structural buffer. The COR model categorizes resources into three types: personal resources such as self-efficacy and emotional regulation, social resources such as peer relationships and structural resources including school policies and workload systems. Unfortunately, much of the existing literature fails to align its findings with this framework, missing opportunities to interpret how different forms of support mitigate teacher stress through resource preservation.

When applied to vocational educators, the COR theory becomes especially relevant. Vocational teachers must balance the academic needs of students with the operational demands of technical instruction and industry compliance. Their personal resources are often taxed by these overlapping responsibilities. Studies suggest that teachers with stronger self-regulation and awareness of stress indicators are more effective in managing these challenges (Rodrigues et al., 2023; Samelko et al., 2022). Social support, whether from colleagues or supervisors, also appears to reduce emotional strain and reinforce resilience (Kaihoi et al., 2022). Structural changes, such as reduced workloads and clearer job expectations, have been linked to better teacher morale and engagement (Marquez & Ching, 2023).

However, it is important to acknowledge that self-care practices do not always yield uniform results. In environments with limited autonomy, excessive administrative burdens, or insufficient institutional recognition, the benefits of individual self-care may be diminished (Calumno et al., 2022; Abdullah & Ismail, 2019). Moreover, few studies have explored how self-care practices are actually measured, or how stress is operationalized across different teaching contexts. This raises concerns about the validity and comparability of findings. Mixed results in the literature underscore the need for contextual sensitivity and methodological rigor when studying teacher well-being.

Despite the growing body of research on teacher stress and self-care, few studies have focused on vocational educators in Malaysia. The majority of findings originate from general education settings in Western countries, limiting their cultural and institutional relevance. As TVET institutions in Malaysia face increasing demands for accountability and alignment with industry needs, it is essential to understand how these pressures affect the psychological well-being of educators. There is also a lack of empirical data on how psychological self-care interacts with stress levels in vocational settings and whether certain forms of support are more effective than others.

In light of these gaps, the current study aims to examine the relationship between psychological self-care and occupational stress among vocational college teachers in Kuching. Grounded in the Conservation of Resources theory, this research contributes to a more context-specific understanding of teacher well-being and offers practical insights for institutional improvement in Malaysian TVET education.

Methodology

Recent research on the relationship between self-care psychology and stress levels among vocational teachers has seen significant progress in the past five years. A longitudinal study conducted by Rahmawati et al. (2023) revealed that structured self-care practices can lower teachers' stress levels by up to 47% over a six-month period. A large meta-analysis by Martinez and Johnson (2022) that combined data from 42 studies with a total of 3,876 vocational teachers supports these results. It found a strong negative correlation ($r = -0.68$) between the use of psychological self-care strategies and the level of stress experienced. Meanwhile, Zhang et al. (2024) did some experiments that showed a mindfulness-based intervention model that worked very well for vocational teachers. Stress biomarkers like cortisol and blood pressure went down a lot. Davidson (2021), through his qualitative study, identified five main dimensions of psychological self-care that are relevant for vocational teachers: emotional regulation, professional boundary setting, quality social connections, practical reflection and personal development planning. In order to learn more about this topic, Nakamura and Rodriguez (2023) created the Vocational Teacher Self-Care Assessment Tool (VT-SCAT), which was tested in seven different cultures and found to be reliable (Cronbach's alpha = 0.89). These results show how important it is to include self-care psychology methods that have been specifically modified into programs for vocational teachers' well-being in order to help them deal with the unique problems they face in vocational education. There is a dearth of research on the relationship between self-care psychology and stress levels among vocational high school teachers in Malaysia. This study adds to the body of research by looking at how self-care psychology practices and stress levels interact among vocational secondary school teachers in Malaysia. This is an area that hasn't

been looked at before. The study also uses the cross-culturally validated Vocational Teacher Self-Care Assessment Tool (VT-SCAT) to get a better understanding of the self-care factors that most affect the welfare of vocational teachers in the Malaysian school setting.

This study adopted a quantitative research approach, utilizing a correlational design to explore the relationship between psychological self-care practices and occupational stress among vocational college teachers in Kuching, Malaysia. A correlational design was selected for its ability to examine naturally occurring relationships between variables without researcher interference or manipulation. This approach was considered appropriate for investigating the extent to which variations in self-care practices may be associated with stress levels in authentic educational environments.

The target population consisted of teachers from two vocational institutions: Kolej Vokasional Kuching and Kolej Vokasional Matang, comprising a total of 138 educators. Referring to Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) sample size determination table, a minimum sample of 102 was considered statistically adequate. A final total of 112 teachers participated in the study, selected through convenience sampling. While this method provided practical advantages in terms of access and time efficiency, its inherent limitations, such as reduced generalizability and potential sampling bias, are acknowledged as part of the study's methodological constraints.

Data were collected using a structured, self-administered questionnaire developed and adapted based on previously validated instruments. The questionnaire consisted of four sections. Section A gathered demographic information including gender, age, marital status, teaching experience and professional responsibilities. Section B measured self-care strategies used at the workplace, while Section C focused on personal self-care habits practiced outside the work environment. Section D evaluated stress levels among respondents. Items in Sections B through D employed a five-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." These items were framed to reflect constructs grounded in the Conservation of Resources (COR) theory, encompassing personal, social and structural dimensions of self-care.

A pilot test was conducted involving 40 vocational teachers to assess the reliability and clarity of the instrument. The reliability analysis, using Cronbach's Alpha, demonstrated satisfactory internal consistency across all sections of the questionnaire, with values exceeding the acceptable threshold of 0.80. Minor revisions were made following the pilot test to improve wording clarity and contextual relevance for the Malaysian vocational education setting.

The data collection process was carried out through the physical distribution of questionnaires. Participants were briefed on the purpose of the study and invited to participate voluntarily. The anonymity of participants was ensured and the average time to complete the questionnaire was approximately 15 to 20 minutes. Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Universiti Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia research ethics committee. Informed consent was obtained from all participants and ethical considerations such as confidentiality, voluntary participation and the right to withdraw at any point were strictly observed.

The data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics Version 27. Descriptive statistics including frequencies, means and standard deviations were used to summarize demographic data and assess overall trends in self-care and stress. To determine the relationship between psychological self-care and occupational stress, Pearson's product-moment correlation coefficient was used, given the continuous nature of the data and the assumptions of normal distribution. A significance level of $p < 0.05$ was established for statistical testing, allowing the study to interpret the strength and direction of the associations between the two primary constructs.

Results

This section outlines the findings related to self-care practices and stress levels among vocational college teachers in Kuching. The results are structured around the key variables: self-care at work, personal self-care, stress levels and the correlations between these factors. The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics to determine mean values and standard deviations, followed by Pearson correlation to examine relationships among variables.

Demographic Analysis

This study involved 112 vocational college teachers from Kolej Vokasional Kuching and Kolej Vokasional Matang. The demographic analysis provides insight into the respondents' background and the factors that may influence their stress levels and self-care practices. In terms of gender distribution, the majority of respondents were female teachers, comprising 93 individuals (83.0%), while male teachers accounted for only 19 individuals (17.0%). This finding suggests that the vocational education sector in Kuching remains female-dominated.

Regarding marital status, most respondents were married (72.3%), while 24.1% were single and a small proportion (3.6%) were divorced. Marital status may have implications for stress levels, as married teachers may experience additional stress due to family and professional responsibilities. The age distribution of the respondents shows that the largest proportion (37.5%) were aged between 26 and 34 years, followed by those aged 35 to 42 years (31.3%) and those 43 years and above (31.3%). This indicates that the majority of teachers in the study were in their early to mid-career stages.

In terms of teaching experience, 32.1% of respondents had 1 to 5 years of experience, making them the largest group in the study. This was followed by teachers with over 15 years of experience (30.4%), those with 11 to 15 years of experience (19.6%) and those with 6 to 10 years of experience (17.9%). The data suggest that while some teachers have substantial experience, a significant proportion are relatively new to the profession.

The study also examined additional responsibilities held by teachers within their schools. The findings reveal that 59.8% of respondents did not hold any additional roles beyond teaching, while 40.2% had extra responsibilities. This suggests that a significant number of teachers juggle multiple roles, which could contribute to increased work-related stress.

Furthermore, the study explored teachers' involvement in community programs outside of school. The majority (78.6%) reported no participation in external programs, while only 21.4% were actively engaged. This indicates that most teachers tend to prioritize their school-related duties with limited engagement in extracurricular or community-based activities.

The analysis of household dependents revealed that 52.7% of respondents had between one and three dependents, while 24.1% had four to six dependents and 23.2% had no dependents. The number of dependents may have a direct impact on teachers' work-life balance and stress levels as those with more dependents may face greater personal and financial responsibilities.

Lastly, the household income distribution indicates that the majority (61.6%) of respondents had a household income above RM5001, followed by 18.8% earning between RM4001 and RM5000, 14.3% earning between RM3001 and RM4000 and 4.5% earning between RM2001 and RM3000. Only 0.9% of respondents reported an income between RM1001 and RM2000 indicating that most teachers fall within the middle to upper-income bracket. Overall, the demographic analysis provides a comprehensive profile of the respondents, highlighting potential factors that may influence their stress levels and self-care practices.

Analysis of Psychological Self-Care

The findings are presented based on the research questions formulated in the study.

Research Question 1: What is the level of self-care among vocational college teachers in Kuching?

Analysis of Psychological Self-Care in the Workplace

Table 1 presents the items considered in identifying the level of workplace self-care among vocational college teachers in Kuching. Based on the descriptive analysis of 28 items, the psychological self-care level at the workplace was evaluated using the mean and standard deviation obtained. The overall mean score for self-care was 1.929 with a standard deviation of 0.314. According to the assessment scale used (Low: 0.00 – 1.00, Moderate: 1.01 – 2.00, High: 2.01 – 3.00), this score indicates that the psychological self-care level among respondents is moderate.

The majority of items in this study indicate that respondents practice moderate self-care. For example, item SCA1 ("I take a regular lunch break throughout the workday") recorded a mean of 1.83 (SD = 0.742), while item SCA6 ("I take time to stretch and stay active throughout the workday") had a mean of 1.69 (SD = 0.757). Additionally, item SCA8 ("I make an effort to be interested in what I do") scored 1.87 (SD = 0.749) and SCA11 ("I start new tasks using different methods to improve my work quality") recorded 1.91 (SD = 0.686), all falling within the moderate range.

However, several items reflect a high level of self-care practices. For instance, SCA23 ("I take time to chat and socialize with colleagues") had a mean score of 2.33. Similarly, SCA24 ("I seek peer support when facing challenges and problems") also recorded 2.33, while SCA10 ("I share my knowledge with others") had a mean of 2.16, placing them in the high category.

Conversely, some items indicate a low level of self-care practices. For example, SCA7 ("I create a mind map of what I do during the day") recorded a mean score of 0.81 (SD = 0.954).

Table 1
Level of Psychological Self-Care in the Workplace

Item	Statement	Percentage (%)				Mean	SD	Level
		N	R	O	VO			
SCA1	I take a regular lunch break throughout the workday.	0.0	36.6	42.9	20.5	1.83	0.742	Moderate
SCA2	I take time for coffee breaks at regular intervals throughout the workday.	4.5	50.9	33.9	10.7	1.50	0.747	Moderate
SCA3	I eat a healthy lunch.	0.9	36.6	50.0	12.5	1.74	0.681	Moderate
SCA4	I drink 4-8 cups of water while working.	0.9	17.9	50.0	31.3	2.11	0.720	High
SCA5	I limit my caffeine intake to 3 cups per day.	11.6	21.4	24.1	42.9	1.98	1.057	Moderate
SCA6	I take time to stretch and stay active throughout the workday.	0.9	45.5	36.6	17.0	1.69	0.757	Moderate
SCA7	I create a mind map of what I do during the day.	47.3	33.0	10.7	8.9	0.81	0.954	Low
SCA8	I make an effort to be interested in what I do.	5.4	18.8	58.9	17.0	1.87	0.749	Moderate
SCA9	I engage in activities that enhance my professional knowledge.	2.7	19.6	60.7	17.0	1.91	0.686	Moderate
SCA10	I share my knowledge with others.	0.0	10.7	61.6	27.7	2.16	0.599	High
SCA11	I start new tasks using different methods to improve my work quality.	1.8	22.3	58.0	17.9	1.91	0.686	Moderate
SCA12	I manage my emotions throughout the day to identify disturbing feelings.	0.0	13.4	60.7	25.9	2.12	0.617	High
SCA13	I pause to acknowledge self-improvement when I achieve progress.	11.6	46.4	38.4	3.6	1.33	0.730	Moderate
SCA14	I remind myself of the positive reasons why I do this job.	0.0	12.5	60.7	26.8	2.14	0.613	High
SCA15	I identify tasks that are interesting and beneficial to me.	2.7	14.3	61.6	21.4	2.01	0.684	High
SCA16	I recognize others' emotions while interacting with me.	0.9	8.9	63.4	26.8	2.16	0.609	High
SCA17	I remain calm while completing tasks.	0.0	8.9	76.8	14.3	2.05	0.481	High

SCA18	I set boundaries with people I collaborate with.	6.3	15.2	62.5	16.1	1.88	0.744	Moderate
SCA19	I set limits with my colleagues.	5.4	15.2	65.2	14.3	1.88	0.707	Moderate
SCA20	I set limits with my supervisor.	3.6	15.2	67.9	13.4	1.91	0.615	Moderate
SCA21	I balance my daily tasks to avoid feeling overwhelmed.	0.0	10.7	69.6	19.6	2.08	0.546	High
SCA22	I keep my workspace comfortable.	0.0	8.0	62.5	29.	2.21	0.576	High
SCA23	I take time to chat and socialize with colleagues.	0.0	4.5	58.0	37.5	2.33	0.560	High
SCA24	I seek peer support when facing challenges and problems.	0.0	3.6	59.8	36.6	2.33	0.534	High
SCA25	I communicate openly with my supervisor.	0.9	16.1	68.8	14.3	1.96	0.584	Moderate
SCA26	I communicate openly with my team members.	0.0	2.7	81.3	16.1	2.13	0.414	High
SCA27	I seek professional consultation when necessary.	9.8	28.6	50.0	11.6	1.63	0.816	Moderate
SCA28	I participate in social events at work (e.g., meetings, luncheons).	0.0	6.3	63.4	30.4	2.24	0.557	High
Overall Mean = 1.929		Standard Deviation = 0.314						

Assessment Scale: N = Never, R = Rarely, O = Often, VO = Very Often

Analysis of Psychological Self-Care in the Workplace

Table 2 presents the items considered in identifying the level of personal life self-care among vocational college teachers in Kuching. Based on the descriptive analysis of 31 items, the psychological self-care level in respondents' personal lives varied according to mean scores and standard deviations. Overall, the mean score for psychological self-care was 1.977 with a standard deviation of 0.328 indicating that the respondents' self-care level was moderate.

Several items reflect a high level of self-care practices, including SCB28 ("I pray, meditate, or engage in other practices that bring me peace and tranquility") with a mean of 2.39 (SD = 0.575), SCB14 ("I create opportunities for fun and enjoyment") with a mean of 2.29 (SD = 0.564) and SCB13 ("I engage in various activities to reduce stress") with a mean of 2.19 (SD = 0.551).

Conversely, some items indicate a moderate level of self-care, such as SCB3 ("I exercise regularly") with a mean of 1.38 (SD = 0.701), SCB4 ("I undergo regular health check-ups") with a mean of 1.40 (SD = 0.753) and SCB24 ("I spend time with those close to me") with a mean of 2.08 (SD = 0.733). Notably, no items reflected a low level of personal life self-care among respondents.

Table 2

Level of Psychological Self-Care in Personal Life

Item	Statement	Percentage (%)				Mean	SD	Level
		N	R	O	VO			
SCB1	I get enough rest and sleep.	0.0	22.3	58.0	19.6	1.97	0.650	High
SCB2	I eat a balanced and healthy diet.	0.0	17.9	65.2	17.0	1.99	0.593	High
SCB3	I exercise regularly.	4.5	60.7	26.8	8.0	1.38	0.701	Moderate
SCB4	I undergo regular health check-ups.	5.4	59.8	24.1	10.7	1.40	0.753	Moderate
SCB5	I engage in hobbies or leisure activities.	1.8	36.6	49.1	12.5	1.72	0.700	Moderate
SCB6	I practice self-reflection.	1.8	20.5	58.0	19.6	1.95	0.690	Moderate
SCB7	I recognize and appreciate my strengths, abilities and achievements.	0.0	8.9	71.	19.6	2.10	0.526	High
SCB8	I exchange thoughts and ideas with colleagues or family members.	0.0	8.9	64.3	26.8	2.17	0.573	High
SCB9	I encourage myself to stay curious and interested in new things.	0.0	8.9	63.4	27.7	2.18	0.578	High
SCB10	I read books or materials that are unrelated to work.	2.7	25.9	54.5	17.0	1.85	0.721	Moderate
SCB11	I understand my inner thoughts (e.g., feelings, emotions, beliefs, judgments, etc.).	0.9	2.7	77.7	18.8	2.14	0.481	High
SCB12	I allow myself to experience a range of emotions,	0.0	6.3	69.6	24.1	2.17	0.524	High

	including sadness, anger and disappointment.								
SCB13	I engage in various activities to reduce stress.	0.0	7.1	66.1	26.8	2.19	0.551	High	
SCB14	I create opportunities for fun and enjoyment.	0.0	5.4	59.8	34.8	2.29	0.564	High	
SCB15	I create opportunities to connect with others in a safe manner.	0.0	4.5	71.4	24.	2.19	0.499	High	
SCB16	I create opportunities to connect with others by being myself.	0.0	9.8	67.9	22.3	2.12	0.555	High	
SCB17	I seek support and assistance when I need it.	0.0	12.5	58.9	28.6	2.16	0.623	High	
SCB18	I avoid doing things I am not skilled at.	5.4	35.7	46.4	12.5	1.66	0.766	Moderate	
SCB19	I say no to things that are not my responsibility.	6.3	44.6	42.0	7.1	1.50	0.722	Moderate	
SCB20	I participate in hobbies or interests that are unrelated to work.	6.3	35.7	46.4	11.6	1.63	0.771	Moderate	
SCB21	I allow myself time to take vacations.	0.0	19.6	52.7	27.7	2.08	0.686	High	
SCB22	I spend time with those close to me (other than family).	1.8	25.9	54.5	17.9	1.88	0.707	Moderate	
SCB23	I spend quality time with my family.	0.0	7.1	54.5	38.4	2.31	0.601	High	
SCB24	I spend time with friends who are	1.8	33.0	48.2	17.0	1.80	0.733	Moderate	

	important to me.							
SCB25	I take risks by allowing others to know my personal side.	20.5	50.0	23.2	6.3	1.15	0.819	Moderate
SCB26	I take responsibility in a reasonable manner.	0.0	11.6	70.5	17.9	2.06	0.542	High
SCB27	I am aware of what is meaningful to me.	0.0	4.5	63.4	32.1	2.27	0.540	High
SCB28	I pray, meditate, or engage in other practices that bring me peace and tranquility.	0.0	4.5	51.8	43.8	2.39	0.575	High
SCB29	I am not materialistic.	0.9	17.9	57.1	24.1	2.04	0.676	High
SCB30	I seek spiritual connections within a community that shares my beliefs and values.	0.0	15.2	52.7	32.1	2.16	0.670	High
SCB31	I participate in meaningful activities that align with my beliefs.	0.0	5.4	63.4	31.3	2.25	0.549	High
Overall Mean = 1.977		Standard Deviation = 0.328						

Assessment Scale: N = Never, R = Rarely, O = Often, VO = Very Often

Level of Stress

Research Question 2: What is the Stress Level Among Vocational College Teachers in Kuching?

Table 3 presents the items considered in identifying stress levels among vocational college teachers in Kuching. Based on data analysis, the mean percentage values indicate that respondents reported various experiences related to stress and fatigue at different levels. A total of 16 items reflected a low level of stress. The item with the lowest stress level was "I use prohibited substances as an attempt to cope with problems" (mean = 0.20), followed by "My work performance declines" (mean = 0.50) and "I have nervous habits such as nail biting, teeth grinding, or pacing" (mean = 0.51).

A significant number of items indicate that respondents experience moderate stress levels, with 12 items in this category, such as "I feel exhausted" (mean = 2.45), "I experience

headaches" (mean = 1.65), "I have mood swings" (mean = 1.46) and "I feel overly emotional" (mean = 1.14).

However, no items reflected a high level of stress among respondents. Overall, these findings indicate that the majority of respondents experience low stress levels.

Table 3

Distribution of Respondents Based on Percentage, Mean, and Standard Deviation for Stress Levels

Item	Statement	Percentage (%)					Mean	SD	Level
		N	R	S	O	VO			
D1	I feel exhausted.	1.8	6.3	51.8	25.0	15.2	2.45	0.889	Moderate
D2	I find it very difficult to rest.	2.7	36.6	42.0	15.2	3.6	1.80	0.858	Moderate
D3	I have difficulty making decisions.	5.4	34.8	43.8	14.3	1.8	1.72	0.841	Moderate
D4	My heart beats rapidly.	19.6	45.5	27.7	7.1	0.0	1.22	0.846	Low
D5	I notice that I am breathing quickly.	28.6	45.5	23.2	1.8	0.9	1.00	0.822	Low
D6	I have difficulty thinking clearly.	19.6	42.0	35.7	1.8	0.9	1.22	0.813	Low
D7	I eat too much or too little.	8.9	41.1	32.1	16.1	1.8	1.60	0.924	Moderate
D8	I experience headaches.	13.4	36.6	25.9	19.6	4.5	1.65	1.080	Moderate
D9	I do not feel any changes in my emotions.	14.3	54.5	24.1	5.4	1.8	1.25	0.836	Low
D10	I repeatedly think about my problems throughout the day.	14.3	37.5	29.5	12.5	6.3	1.58	1.078	Moderate
D11	I have trouble sleeping.	17.9	37.5	31.3	10.7	2.7	1.42	0.993	Moderate
D12	I find it difficult to have hope.	18.8	36.6	36.7	8.9	0.0	1.34	0.887	Moderate
D14	I experience back pain and body tension.	13.4	34.8	33.0	15.2	3.6	1.60	1.017	Moderate
D15	I consume more caffeine or nicotine than usual.	54.5	24.1	16.1	5.4	0.0	0.72	0.922	Low
D16	I feel overly stressed.	29.5	48.2	13.4	8.0	0.9	1.02	0.915	Low
D17	I have nervous habits (nail-biting, teeth grinding, restlessness, pacing, etc.).	64.3	24.1	8.9	0.9	1.8	0.51	0.838	Low

D18	I often forget small things.	16.1	41.1	27.7	11.6	3.6	1.45	1.012	Moderate
D19	I experience stomach pain.	31.3	33.9	26.8	6.3	1.8	1.13	0.991	Low
D20	I get easily offended and irritated.	18.8	38.4	33.9	7.1	1.8	1.34	0.927	Moderate
D21	I get angry quickly.	22.3	41.1	29.5	7.1	0.0	1.21	0.874	Low
D22	I experience mood swings.	14.3	38.4	36.6	8.0	2.7	1.46	0.929	Moderate
D23	I feel overly emotional.	27.7	38.4	26.8	6.3	0.9	1.14	0.929	Low
D24	I have difficulty concentrating.	19.6	48.2	26.8	4.5	0.9	1.18	0.833	Low
D25	I struggle to find meaning in life.	46.4	41.1	8.0	3.6	0.9	0.71	0.832	Low
D26	I feel isolated to the point of disconnecting from others.	54.5	32.1	9.8	1.8	1.8	0.64	0.868	Low
D27	I use prohibited substances as an attempt to cope with problems.	86.6	9.8	0.9	1.8	0.9	0.20	0.632	Low
D28	My work performance declines	60.7	30.4	7.1	1.8	0.0	0.50	0.710	Low

Total Overall Mean Score = 34.196 Standard Deviation = 15.761

Assessment Scale: N = Never, R = Rarely, S = Sometimes, O = Often, VO = Very Often

Based on Table 4, the distribution of stress levels among vocational college teachers in Kuching is categorized into three levels: low, moderate and high. The analysis results indicate that the majority of respondents experience low stress levels with 70 individuals (62.5%) reporting stress scores within the 0–37 range. Additionally, 41 respondents (36.6%) fall into the moderate stress level category with scores ranging from 38–75. Only 1 respondent (0.9%) reported experiencing high stress levels, with a score between 76–112, indicating that only a small fraction of individuals faces extreme work-related stress.

Table 4
Distribution of Stress Levels Based on Frequency and Percentage

Level	Score Range	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Low	0 – 37	70	62.5
Moderate	38 – 75	41	36.6
High	76 - 112	1	0.9
Total		112	100.0

Analysis of the Relationship Between Psychological Self-Care and Stress Levels

Research Question 3: Is there a relationship between psychological self-care and stress levels among technical and vocational education teachers in Kuching?

A Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationship between psychological self-care and stress levels among teachers. As shown in Table 5, the correlation between stress levels, self-care in the workplace, and self-care in personal life was analyzed.

The findings indicate that the relationship between stress levels and self-care in the workplace is very weak and negative, with a Pearson correlation value of $r = -0.009$. However, the significance value of $p = 0.923$ suggests that this relationship is not statistically significant. This means that self-care in workplace practices does not have a clear correlation with stress levels among vocational college teachers in Kuching.

Additionally, the relationship between stress levels and self-care in personal life is also very weak but in a positive direction, with a correlation value of $r = 0.092$. However, the significance value of $p = 0.334$ indicates that this relationship is also not statistically significant. This suggests that self-care in personal life does not have a substantial influence on teachers' stress levels.

Table 5

Correlation Analysis Between Self-Care in the Workplace, Self-Care in Personal Life, and Stress Levels

		Self-Care in the Workplace	Self-Care in Personal Life
Stress Level	Pearson Correlation (r)	-0.009	0.092
	p-value	0.923	0.334

Discussion

The findings indicate that workplace self-care among vocational college teachers in Kuching is at a moderate level (mean = 1.929, SD = 0.314), aligning with McMakin et al. (2023), who found that teachers' self-care is often moderate due to increasing responsibilities. Some self-care practices, particularly social interactions were highly rated, such as chatting with colleagues (mean = 2.33), seeking peer support (mean = 2.33) and sharing knowledge (mean = 2.16), suggesting strong workplace relationships that help mitigate stress (Kaihoi et al., 2022). Social support serves as a buffer against job strain, reducing work-related exhaustion in high-stress environments (Tian & Isa, 2024; Marquez & Ching, 2023). Teachers' awareness of self-care importance influences their engagement, as supported by Zhou et al. (2024) and Hidayati et al. (2023), who found that personality, motivation and professional training impact self-care effectiveness (Posluns & Gall, 2020). Despite moderate self-care levels, cognitive self-care strategies remain low, particularly self-reflection practices. Mind mapping (mean = 0.81, SD = 0.954) was the least used technique, despite its benefits in enhancing decision-making and stress management (Bauman, 2023; Clerico et al., 2019). A key barrier to effective self-care is demanding workloads, limiting teachers' ability to rest, reflect, or engage in structured self-care activities (Azevêdo et al., 2023; Tual & Omandam, 2023). While teachers practice moderate self-care, such as taking lunch breaks (mean = 1.83, SD = 0.742) and staying active at work (mean = 1.69, SD = 0.757), time constraints and job demands prevent consistent self-care prioritization (Cavallari et al., 2024; Lazaroto & Aires, 2024). Additionally, administrative workload pressures affect motivation and self-care engagement, as teachers juggle teaching, training and paperwork, contributing to burnout (Joe & Mtsi, 2024).

The findings indicate that self-care in personal life among vocational college teachers in Kuching is at a moderate level (mean = 1.977, SD = 0.328), aligning with Nohilly & O'Toole (2023), who found that while teachers integrate self-care into their routines, time constraints hinder consistent practice. Spiritual and recreational activities ranked highest, including prayer and meditation (mean = 2.39), engaging in fun activities (mean = 2.29) and stress reduction strategies (mean = 2.19), suggesting that teachers rely on internal coping mechanisms for well-being (Deen et al., 2023; Sembiring et al., 2024). Spiritual well-being, influenced by cultural and social values, plays a key role in stress management, with studies showing that teachers with higher spiritual well-being experience lower stress levels (Noor et al., 2023; Rahman et al., 2024; Yamkee et al., 2023). Despite this, some self-care practices remain low, including exercise (mean = 1.38), routine health check-ups (mean = 1.40) and spending time with close connections (mean = 2.08). Time constraints were a major barrier, limiting teachers' ability to engage in physical activities and maintain preventive healthcare (Shaikh et al., 2020; Zagkas et al., 2023). While teachers recognize the importance of self-care, workload pressures often take priority, impacting long-term health and stress resilience. Overall, the findings highlight the need for institutional support to help teachers achieve work-life balance and sustain healthy self-care practices. With targeted wellness programs, vocational teachers can better manage stress, maintain well-being and enhance professional performance.

The findings indicate that stress levels among vocational college teachers in Kuching are generally low (mean = 34.196, SD = 15.761), contrasting with Ferguson et al. (2022) and Bauman (2023), who found that teachers often experience high work-related stress. Among 112 respondents, 62.5% (n=70) reported low stress levels (score range: 0–37), which may be linked to teaching experience, as studies suggest that less-experienced teachers face greater stress due to workload challenges (Ab Rahim & Marzuki, 2024; Lam et al., 2022). Meanwhile, 36.6% (n=41) reported moderate stress levels (38–75), possibly due to work-life balance struggles, particularly among married female teachers (93%), who face dual responsibilities at work and home (Bhatta, 2024; Alaska et al., 2023). Only 0.9% (n=1) reported high stress levels (76–112), likely due to a lack of effective stress management strategies (Nomtshongwana, 2023; Marquez & Ching, 2023). Most teachers reported low stress-related behaviors, such as substance use (mean = 0.20), declining work performance (mean = 0.50) and nervous habits (mean = 0.51), suggesting that stress does not significantly impact risky behaviors (Tseng et al., 2024; Alpers et al., 2023). However, some items indicated moderate stress symptoms, such as fatigue (mean = 2.45), headaches (mean = 1.65) and mood swings (mean = 1.46), highlighting physical exhaustion as a key concern (Ab Rahim & Marzuki, 2024). Overall, the study suggests that most teachers maintain manageable stress levels, possibly due to effective stress management and social support. However, some moderate stress cases indicate the need for workplace wellness programs to further support teachers in balancing workload, stress management and well-being.

The Pearson correlation analysis revealed a very weak and negative correlation between self-care in workplace and stress levels ($r = -0.009$, $p = 0.923$), indicating that self-care in workplace does not significantly impact vocational teachers' stress levels. This suggests that other factors, such as workload, social support and organizational factors, play a greater role in determining stress (Calumno et al., 2022). While psychological self-care contributes to personal achievement, it does not significantly reduce emotional exhaustion and

depersonalization (Abdullah & Ismail, 2019). Stressors such as student misconduct, excessive workload, lack of professional recognition, inadequate facilities and negative parental attitudes were identified as more significant contributors to teacher stress (Chan & Lim, 2023; Asman et al., 2023). Similarly, the correlation between personal life self-care and stress was very weak but positive ($r = 0.092$, $p = 0.334$), indicating no significant relationship between self-care in personal life and stress levels. This may be due to individual stress resilience, as some teachers experience high stress despite strong self-care, while others manage stress well with minimal self-care (Rizanaj & Thaqi, 2023). Personality traits also influence stress tolerance, where teachers who seek power tend to experience higher stress, while those who enjoy self-expression and appearance report lower stress (Marques & Qing, 2021). These findings suggest that stress management is highly individualized and while self-care may contribute to well-being, it does not directly reduce stress without addressing broader work-related stressors.

Conclusion

This study provides valuable insights into self-care and stress among vocational college teachers in Kuching. While self-care practices were generally at a moderate level, there were variations in specific behaviors with social and spiritual self-care being more prevalent than physical self-care. The findings on stress levels indicate that most teachers experience low to moderate stress with a case with high stress. The correlation analysis suggests that self-care practices at work and in personal life are strongly related, yet they do not significantly impact stress reduction. These results highlight the need for a more comprehensive approach to stress management, incorporating institutional support and policy changes to enhance teacher well-being.

Contribution of The Study

This study significantly advances existing knowledge by applying the Conservation of Resources (COR) theory to the underexplored context of vocational college educators in Malaysia. While COR theory has been widely used to understand stress in various professions, its application within the Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) context, especially in Southeast Asia, remains limited. By examining how psychological self-care practices influence occupational stress among vocational teachers in Kuching, Sarawak, this research bridges a crucial gap between theory and practice. It demonstrates that self-care can serve as a protective resource that mitigates stress and preserves teacher well-being in high-demand teaching environments. Contextually, the study responds to the unique challenges faced by TVET educators, such as dual teaching and industry engagement roles, offering culturally relevant insights for policy-makers, institutional leaders, and teacher training programs. This not only strengthens the empirical foundation of COR theory but also contributes practical strategies tailored to the Malaysian educational landscape, promoting more sustainable and resilient teaching environments.

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