

## Association of Perceived Academic Stress and Coping Strategies among Undergraduate Students

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In today's competitive world, every student is likely to experience stress at some point. While some students may feel more stressed than others and some may manage stress more effectively, yet it is impossible for anyone to completely eliminate stress from their lives. The study investigated the relationship of perceived academic stress and coping strategies among undergraduate students. Online survey was adopted to collect the data from the students. The instrument used for the study was perception of academic stress scale (PAS) and Brief-COPE. 366 students responded the survey. The findings of the study indicated that there was a significant difference between male and female students in perceived academic stress however no significant difference was found in Brief-COPE. A negative significant relationship was found between PAS and Brief-COPE. The study finding can pave way for other researcher by illuminating on the association of academic stress and coping strategies of undergraduate students.

**Keywords:** Academic stress, coping, undergraduate students

In the world, many people regardless of their age, ethnicity, beliefs, occupation, academic background, or surrounding environment (Esiya-Donkoh, Yelkpiere & Esiya-Donkoh, 2011) experience stress in different forms which affects in different walks of life. Stress is regarded as body's reaction, both neurologically and physiologically, to adjust to new conditions (Mustafa, 2024). For a student, experiencing stress can be the result of failure in academics, high expectations from teachers or parents, financial or relationship problems, time constraints, family problems etc. these events are considered as stressors (Fairbrother & Warn, 2003). Experiencing stress for students can be different, some may feel more stress and others may handle stress more efficiently than others however, no one can completely roll out stress from their lives (Mohan, 2008, as cited in Mustafa, 2024). The intensity of stress could range between mild and severe depending on the person. Any person can experience a positive or negative stress: A positive stress or eustress that persuades a

person to proceed to do their work. This good stress is an ideal level of stress which empowers and motivates an individual to learn and can enhance learning capability (Yusoff, 2010). On the contrary, the negative stress or distress prevents and suppresses learning and must be halted and shunned. According to study findings, when an individual is over exposed to stress, it causes an individual to undergo emotional problem, physical and mental health problem (Yusoff, 2010) like headache, sleep problems, anxiety, restlessness, fatigue, sadness, drinking problem, falling into depression and many other health problems (Sharma, 2018). Thus, stress is an unavoidable phenomenon in all aspects of human life (Rana et al., 2019). Research evidence supports that college students' experience different level of stress in the course of study (Qahtani & Alsubaie, 2020).

Stress is a major issue in scholastic and academic, as stress is one kind of the stretch which emerges in within the scholastic setting

such as schools and colleges (Pazi et al., 2021). In addition, Sharma (2018) characterizes academic stress as a react to the number of errands that the students need to do. Previous study have found that students' own poor learning foundation, low self-evaluation, and lack of interest and initiative in learning can lead to academic tiresome (Mustafa 2024). Albeit, reasonable stress can improve task performance (Yusoff, 2010 ) and creativity for working under pressure (Aina & Wijayati, 2019). From the point of view of the students, sometimes the students definitely need to be in a situation which will enforce them for doing something seriously and productively. On the contrary, studies had shown that excessive academic stress not only causes pessimistic cognitive outlook toward academics, but affects students' performance (Karaman et al., 2019), and reduces students' academic performance (Canup, 2016 as cited in Gao 2023); behaviorally leading to academic procrastination (Gao, 2023) mobile phone dependence (Shen et al., 2021), and also emotionally inducing depression, reduced mental health and even suicidal tendencies (Okechukwu et al., 2022). Therefore, when academic stress is not attended it can affect students- mentally, physically, intellectually, behaviourally, and emotionally.

Coping refers to how students manage stress. It involves behavioral and cognitive efforts to handle situations they perceive as significant for regulating stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Crockett et al., 2007). Importantly, stress affects individuals differently, with personal differences playing a crucial role in coping strategies (Carver & Scheier & Weintraub, 1989; Yumba, 2008). Various factors such as time constraints, an overloaded academic curriculum, and competitiveness can influence how students cope with challenges during their education, potentially impacting their ability to focus or learn new information.

University life represents a vibrant and exciting phase of early adulthood, where students not only pursue education but also experience significant intellectual growth (Mustafa, 2024). However, this period is also marked by challenges that young adults sometimes struggle to manage effectively. These challenges, ranging from academic pressures to personal issues, often lead to high levels of stress among students (Pariat et al., 2014). Many faced difficulties in their academics and daily lives, with stress becoming a pervasive aspect for some (Abdullah, Elias, Uli & Mahyuddin, 2010). Various factors contribute to student stress, such as heavy workloads, unclear assignments, feelings of inadequacy, and strained relationships (Shaikh et al., 2004). Financial pressures (Ann, R et al, 2009) further exacerbate stress, particularly among students from low socioeconomic backgrounds (Mori as cited in Ganesan et al., 2018). This stress not only affects students' mental and physical health but also their academic performance (David as cited in Kumar & Bhukar, 2013). Some student cope with stress by engaging in unhealthy behaviors like binge drinking or unhealthy eating habits while others view it as a challenge to overcome.

Coping mechanisms are crucial for managing and alleviating stress in individuals. Students employ various coping strategies to overcome their stressors. For instance, Pariat et al. (2014) highlighted that practices like prayer, meditation, and adequate sleep are highly effective for students dealing with academic stress. However, an inability to manage stress can lead to adverse effects such as sleep disturbances (Ann, R. et al, 2009) and health issues, ultimately contributing to anxiety and depression. Joseph et al. (2021) discovered that activities such as efficient time management, sharing of problems, structure problem solving, socializing with friends, seek

social support, meditation and getting enough sleep are beneficial in relieving stress. Effective coping strategies are crucial in mitigating stress and supporting students' psychosocial adaptation (Yusoff, 2010).

Stress is inevitable for every individual. Numerous studies have been conducted to see the effect or the level of stress and coping strategies adopted by the college students, but inconsistent findings warrant to further investigation (Alkhaldeh et al. 2023). As limited or no studies are documented in Naga context and especially in understanding the perceived academic stress- one of the prominent and determinant of mental health issues among the students and has become a significant cause of concern (Reddy Menon & Thattil, 2018), therefore the current study examines the association of the perception of academic stress and coping strategies among undergraduate students.

### **Objectives**

- To compare the mean difference of perception of academic stress and coping strategies between male and female under graduate students.
- To find out the association between perceived academic stress and coping strategy.

### **Hypotheses**

- There will be a significant difference of perception of academic stress between male and female undergraduate students.
- There will be a significant difference of coping strategies between male and female undergraduate students.
- There will be an association between perception of academic stress and coping strategies.

## **Method**

### **Sample**

Sample population, size and description: The sample consisted of undergraduate students studying in Kohima, including both male and female within the age range of 18-26 years. The sample population employed for the study was 366 students out of which 143 were male and 223 females from different private colleges in Kohima, Nagaland.

### **Tools**

*Perception of Academic Stress Scale:* The perception of academic stress scale was adapted from Bedewy and Gabriel (2015). The scale measures a student's perception of stress they experience due to academics. Respondents were asked to rate on a 5-point Likert-type scale (from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree for 13 items and 5 items scoring from 1 = strongly agree to 5 = strongly disagree) their perceptions and experiences about each item in measuring sources of academic stress. There are four factors in this scale: pressures to perform, perceptions of workload and examinations, self-perceptions and time restraints.

The scale for the present study shows an internal consistency measured through Cronbach's alpha at .822.

*Brief-COPE inventory:* The Brief-COPE is a 28 item self-report questionnaire by Carver (1997) designed to measure effective and ineffective ways to cope with a stressful life event. The statements of the scale are responded in 1 = I haven't been doing this at all, 2 = A little bit, 3 = A medium amount, 4 = I've been doing this a lot. The scale can determine someone's primary coping styles with scores on the following three subscales: Problem-Focused Coping, emotion-focused coping and avoidant coping. The scale for the present study shows an internal consistency measured through Cronbach's alpha at .72

## Procedure

The data was collected through online platform; google form link was prepared and shared through Whatsapp among the student. The google form consisted of inform consent and description of the research study additionally the adoption of ethics in conducting the research.

After the participants consented to participate, the form directs the respondents to give required demographic details, and then the form proceeded to responding the questionnaire- perception of academic stress scale and Brief COPE inventory. The window period for data collection was three weeks. Unfortunately, 10 respondents do not fulfill the inclusion criteria therefore their response was not included. Subsequently, the data were recorded in the Google sheet which was further saved for analysis.

## Data analysis

The data collected was analyzed using IBM SPSS 25. Descriptive statistics was used to assess the mean, SD and percentage of the variables. The normality of the data was tested using Kolmogorov Smirnov in which it has been found that the data was normally distributed. Therefore, for computing mean difference of variables between genders independent t test was applied. For finding the association between the variables and its subtypes Pearson's correlation coefficient was computed.

## Ethical considerations

- Researcher explained the purpose of the study to the participant.
- Researcher requested the participants to give consent before participating.
- Participants were also assured of the anonymity and confidentiality of their responses.

## Results

### Demographic details

A total of 366 (100%) students responded to the questionnaire out of which 39% of the respondents were male students and 61% were female students. The mean age of respondents was 21 years. All the respondents of the study were students studying in private college in Kohima.

Table 1. Mean difference of Perceived Academic Stress among gender

Gender	Perceived Academic Stress		t(364)	p	Cohen's d
	M	SD			
Male	53.52	6.844	3.186	.001*	0.342
Female	51.22	6.587			

\*p<0.05

There is a significant difference between male and female in perception of academic stress. Table 1 shows mean, standard deviation, t-value, p-value and cohen's d value indicating there is a significant difference between male and female students in perception of academic stress indicating that male and female experience perceived academic stress differently. Thus, hypothesis 1 is accepted.

A study done by Karaman et al. (2019) found that female college students had higher academic stress than male college students. However, Barbayannis et al. (2022) also found from their study that college students are not evenly impacted by academic stress.

Table 2. Mean difference of Brief-COPE among gender

Gender	Brief-COPE Academic Stress		t(364)	p	Cohen's d
	M	SD			
Male	65.47	10.442	-1.058	.291	-0.113
Female	66.66	10.614			

Independent t test was computed to see the difference between male and female in coping. Table 2 shows mean, standard deviation, t-value, p-value and cohen's d value indicating there is no significant difference found between male and female in coping. According to the findings of Graves et al. (2021) that there are gender differences in coping strategies. Females often use social support and seek help as their primary coping mechanisms. In contrast, males tend

to use either active coping strategies or avoidant methods, such as alcohol or drug use (Dyson & Renk, 2006). Women are more likely to employ emotionally focused coping strategy, such as seeking support or positive reframing (Misigo, 2015, Matud, 2004). However, the findings of the present study align with the findings of Donaldson et al. (2000) where they found no gender differences in coping with stress. Thus, hypothesis 2 is rejected.

Table 3. Association of perception of academic stress and Brief-COPE and its subscales

Variables	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Perception of Academic Stress	366	52.11	6.774	-	-	-	-	-	-
2. Brief-COPE	366	66.16	10.549	-.187**	-	-	-	-	-
3. Pressure to perform <sup>a</sup>	366	13.69	2.516	-	-.213**	-	-	-	-
4. Perception of workload and examination <sup>a</sup>	366	10.39	2.246	-	-.203**	-	-	-	-
5. Academic Self-perception <sup>a</sup>	366	12.98	2.563	-	.022	-	-	-	-
6. Time constraints <sup>a</sup>	366	15.07	2.632	-	-.127*	-	-	-	-
7. Problem focused coping <sup>b</sup>	366	20.79	4.208	.123*	-	-.034	.031	.261**	.068
8. Emotion focused coping <sup>b</sup>	366	29.53	5.682	-.216*	-	-.223**	-.202**	-.050	-.121*
9. Avoidance coping <sup>b</sup>	366	15.87	3.480	-.364**	-	-.241**	-.322**	-.167**	-.270**

<sup>a</sup> factor of perception of academic stress

<sup>b</sup> subscales of Brief-COPE

\*p < 0.05, \*\*p < 0.01

Pearson's correlation coefficient was computed to see the association between perception of academic stress and coping strategies, and its subscales. Table 3 shows that there is a negative significant relationship between perception of academic stress and coping ( $p < 0.01$ ,  $r = -.187$ ). The result also indicated that there is negative significant relationship in coping with the first, second and fourth factors of perception of academic stress- pressure to perform, perception of workload and examination, and time constraints ( $p < 0.01$ ,  $r = -.213$ ,  $r = -.203$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ,  $r = -.127$ ). However, no significant association was found between academic

self-perception and coping ( $r = .022$ ). Subsequently, result findings also indicates that there is positive significant relationship between problem solving and perceived academic stress ( $p < 0.05$ ,  $r = .123$ ), aligns with the findings of Joseph et al. (2018), that coping with stress was better among respondents with elevated level of academic stress, suggesting that students who perceived greater academic stress were in a position to apply coping strategies against it in a much better way. The finding also indicated that there is a significant negative relationship in the subscales of coping i.e., emotion focused and avoidance coping with

perceived academic stress ( $p < 0.05$ ,  $r = -.216$  and  $p < 0.01$ ,  $r = -.364$  respectively). Additionally, for the association between the factors of perceived academic stress and subscales of coping strategies, a positive significant relationship between problem focused coping with academic self-perception ( $p < 0.01$ ,  $r = .261$ ). The result findings also indicates that there is a negative significant relationship between emotion focused coping with pressure to perform, perception of workload and examination, and time constraints ( $p < 0.01$ ,  $r = -.223$ ,  $-.202$  and  $p < 0.05$ ,  $r = -.121$ ). A negative significant relationship was found between avoidance coping with all the factors of perceived academic stress- pressure to perform, perception of workload and examination, academic self-perception and time constraints ( $p < 0.01$ ,  $r = -.241$ ,  $-.322$ ,  $-.167$  and  $-.270$ ).

However, no significant relationship was found between problem focused coping and the factors of perception of academic stress i.e., pressure to perform, perception of workload and examination, and time constraints ( $r = -.034$ ,  $.031$  and  $.068$  respectively), emotion focused with academic self-perception ( $r = -.050$ ).

### Discussion

The study investigated to find if their exist difference in perception of academic stress and coping strategies between male and female college students and the association of perceived academic stress and coping strategies. The result found that there is a significant difference with regard to perceived academic stress among male and female college students. Graves et al, (2021) found in their study that there is a significant gender differences in perceived stress levels, where the females reported considerably higher than the males. Researchers study on gender differences in coping behavior is inconclusive. Many studies have observed that men and women cope with stress

differently: men often use problem-focused strategies, while women tend to employ methods that alter their emotional response. As reported in Misra and McKean (2004) study, female students are more likely to express their feelings, while male students more frequently report controlling their emotions, accepting the problem, avoiding thoughts about the situation, and focusing on problem-solving. However, these tendencies can vary depending on the situation (Matud, 2004), additionally coping styles for dealing with stressors may vary by gender. In the present study, no disparity was established on coping strategies between male and female students. According to Emslie et al. (2002), over the past twenty-year, gender differences in coping strategies might be diminishing and becoming less consistent, potentially reflecting broader social changes in gender roles and constraints. This shift in context could explain some of the observed variations in gender-related coping strategies depending on whether problem-focused or emotion-focused strategies or avoidance strategies are employed. These social changes might account for the minimal gender differences found in this study, additionally the small effect sizes identified in the study support the notion that the adoption of coping strategies between genders may be decreasing over time.

The outcome of the study found that there is negative significant association between perception of academic stress and coping among the students. Some findings of the study include, there is positive as well as negative significant association between the perceived academic stress and the subscales of coping strategies that is emotion-focused coping and avoidance coping. According to Matud (2004) women tend to adopt coping strategies that are intended at changing their emotional responses to a situation. Additionally in the findings of Kelly et al,

(2008), demonstrated that gender moderates the bond between use of emotion-focused coping styles and levels of subclinical levels of depression and anxiety. According to Ganesan et.al., (2018), students employed various coping strategies when faced with stress. The most popular methods included catching with friends, seeking guidance or opinion from others, and conversing to people for emotional support, collectively referred to as stress coping means. Pariat and colleagues (2014) concluded that students with effective coping skills are likely to experience fewer psychological problems, whereas those lacking healthy coping strategies face a higher risk of health issues and potentially antisocial behaviors. Consequently, these students may develop problems such as anxiety, stress overload, depression, and social conflicts.

### **Implications**

The transition to college is inherently stressful and is likely to continue being so. However, by educating students about managing stress and adapting to new situations, they may come to view academic stress as a source of motivation and persist through their challenges. Anticipating future outcomes while coping with stress can help students recognize that valuable lessons can be learned from such experiences (Mason, 2017) and could positively impact their future coping skills.

Future research should focus on identifying which specific programs that can offer the most effective support for students. Additionally, supporting students by offering healthy methods for reducing and coping with academic stress, can create a more productive and motivating environment.

### **Limitations**

The discrepancy in the ratio of the participants makes it difficult to construe the

distinction of perceived academic stress and coping strategies among genders. The research method adopted precludes making any causal association between the variables studied. The study adopted convenience sampling method for recruiting the sample and using online platform to collect the data. The participants may have answered the survey questions to satisfy the condition with little regard to the quality or accuracy of the answer. The social desirable answer bias may have influence the research findings.

### **Conclusion**

The investigation of the study identified that, there is a significant difference in perception of academic stress between male and female students indicating a disparity between male and female students in the perception of academic stress. However, no difference was found in coping strategies between male and female students. College is a place that offers students opportunities to challenge themselves and grow; guiding them to explore their adult identity and deal effectively with stress will enhance their quality of life (Al-Qahtani & Alsubaie, 2020) and shape their career paths. However, excessive stress and confusion can hinder these opportunities. Colleges could improve by better connecting stressed students with resources that support their transition and coping strategies, ultimately enhancing their success throughout their college experience (Scribner et al., 2020).

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