

**COPING STRATEGIES AND ACADEMIC STRESS AMONG UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS
IN IGNATIUS AJURU UNIVERSITY OF EDUCATION IN RIVERS STATE**

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the relationship between coping strategies and academic stress among undergraduate students at Ignatius Ajuru University of Education in Rivers State. Specifically, it investigated the extent to which problem-focused and emotion-focused coping strategies relate to levels of academic stress. The study adopted a correlational research design and involved a population of 8,000 undergraduate students, from which a sample of 367 students was selected using stratified random sampling. Data were collected through a structured questionnaire, and reliability was confirmed through a pilot study with Cronbach's alpha values of 0.82 for coping strategies and 0.85 for academic stress. Pearson correlation analysis was used to test the hypotheses at a 0.05 significance level. Findings revealed a significant negative relationship between problem-focused coping strategies and academic stress ($r = -0.462, p < 0.05$), indicating that students who actively address academic challenges experienced lower stress. Conversely, a significant positive relationship was found between emotion-focused coping strategies and academic stress ($r = 0.314, p < 0.05$), suggesting that reliance on emotion-oriented strategies is associated with higher stress levels. The results underscore the importance of adopting effective coping strategies to manage academic stress and highlight the need for interventions that promote problem-solving skills among students. The study recommends workshops, counseling services, and stress management programs that enhance adaptive coping mechanisms to support students' well-being and academic performance.

Keywords: Coping strategies, Problem-focused coping, Emotion-focused coping, Academic stress, Undergraduate students, Ignatius Ajuru University of Education.

Introduction

Coping strategies and academic stress among undergraduate students in Ignatius Ajuru University of Education in Rivers State is a topic that captures the ongoing challenge many students face trying to balance academic demands with personal wellbeing. Academic stress refers to the psychological strain associated with educational activities, examinations, assignments, and the pressure to achieve high grades (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). For undergraduates, especially in competitive environments, stress can stem from workload, time management difficulties, fear of failure, and social expectations. These stressors not only affect academic performance but can also influence emotional and physical health if left unmanaged (Misra and McKean, 2000).

Undergraduate life typically introduces students to new levels of responsibility, independence, and academic rigor, which can heighten stress levels. Studies have shown that academic stress is not unique to one institution or culture but is a common experience in higher education settings globally (Hurst, Baranik and Daniel, 2013). In the context of Nigerian universities, the combination of limited resources, high student populations, and societal expectations can intensify the pressure on students to succeed. Ignatius Ajuru University of Education, like many institutions, offers a range of programs that demand consistent academic engagement, and this environment underscores the importance of understanding how students cope with these pressures.

Coping strategies refer to the cognitive and behavioural efforts individuals use to manage stressors perceived as overwhelming or threatening (Carver, Scheier and Weintraub, 1989). These strategies

differ widely among students; some adopt problem-focused approaches such as time management and seeking academic support, while others use emotion-focused methods like relaxation, socialising, or avoidance. Research indicates that the type of coping strategy employed can influence academic outcomes, with active coping often linked to better adjustment and lower stress levels (Folkman and Lazarus, 1988). For example, time management and seeking help from peers or lecturers are associated with higher academic satisfaction.

The relationship between coping strategies and academic stress is complex and mediated by individual characteristics such as personality, resilience, and socio-cultural background. Some students may have adaptive coping styles that enable them to navigate stress effectively, while others may resort to maladaptive behaviours like procrastination or withdrawal (Ye et al., 2013). In the Nigerian higher education context, family expectations and financial concerns can further complicate how students respond to stress. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for developing interventions tailored to the unique needs of Nigerian undergraduates.

Research on coping and academic stress has highlighted the role of institutional support systems in mitigating negative outcomes. Universities that provide counselling services, stress management workshops, and peer support networks help students develop healthier coping mechanisms (Pritchard and Wilson, 2003). These services can equip students with skills to interpret stressors more constructively, reduce anxiety, and improve academic performance. Despite this, many institutions struggle with providing comprehensive support due to resource constraints, which underscores the need for targeted research and policy attention.

This study focuses on undergraduate students at Ignatius Ajuru University of Education to explore the specific coping strategies they use and the extent to which these strategies relate to academic stress levels. By examining patterns of stress and coping within this population, the research aims to inform stakeholders about practical ways to support student wellbeing and academic success. Such insights can contribute to broader efforts to enhance student mental health and educational outcomes within Nigerian universities.

Statement of the Problem

Academic stress is a pervasive issue among undergraduate students, often resulting from the demands of rigorous coursework, examinations, and the pressure to achieve high grades. At Ignatius Ajuru University of Education, students face multiple challenges, including heavy academic workloads, tight deadlines, and the need to balance social and personal responsibilities alongside their studies. These stressors can negatively affect students' mental health, leading to anxiety, sleep disturbances, and decreased motivation, which ultimately impacts their academic performance and overall wellbeing (Misra and McKean, 2000; Hurst, Baranik and Daniel, 2013). Despite the evident impact of stress, there is limited empirical research on how students in this institution cope with academic pressures, leaving a gap in understanding the strategies that could mitigate stress effectively.

Furthermore, while coping strategies are known to influence how students manage academic challenges, not all students employ adaptive methods. Some may rely on avoidance or other maladaptive approaches, which can exacerbate stress and hinder academic success (Carver, Scheier and Weintraub, 1989). In the Nigerian higher education context, factors such as financial constraints, family expectations, and limited institutional support can further intensify stress, making effective coping mechanisms critical for student adjustment. This study seeks to identify the coping strategies used by undergraduate students at Ignatius Ajuru University of Education and examine how these strategies relate to levels of academic stress, providing insights that can inform policies and programs aimed at promoting student mental health and academic achievement.

Aim and Objectives of the Study

To investigate the relationship between coping strategies and academic stress among undergraduate students at Ignatius Ajuru University of Education.

1. To examine the relationship between problem-focused coping strategies and academic stress among undergraduate students.
2. To examine the relationship between emotion-focused coping strategies and academic stress among undergraduate students.

Research Questions

1. What is the relationship between problem-focused coping strategies and academic stress among undergraduate students?
2. What is the relationship between emotion-focused coping strategies and academic stress among undergraduate students?

Hypotheses

1. There is no significant relationship between problem-focused coping strategies and academic stress among undergraduate students.
2. There is no significant relationship between emotion-focused coping strategies and academic stress among undergraduate students.

Literature Review

Coping strategies are the cognitive and behavioural efforts individuals use to manage demands that they perceive as exceeding their resources. These strategies are broadly classified into problem-focused and emotion-focused approaches. Problem-focused coping involves actively addressing the source of stress through actions like planning, time management, and seeking academic help, whereas emotion-focused coping aims to regulate emotional responses to stressors through activities like relaxation or social support (Folkman and Lazarus 1980). The way students cope can influence how effectively they navigate academic challenges, with some strategies helping reduce stress and others having limited impact on academic outcomes.

Problem-focused coping strategies have been linked to better adjustment in academic settings because they involve directly tackling the sources of stress. Students who use problem-solving techniques, time management, and seeking academic assistance tend to report lower levels of stress and higher academic achievement (Zeidner and Endler 1996). These strategies enable students to break down complex tasks, plan ahead, and utilise resources provided by the institution, which can reduce feelings of overwhelm during peak academic periods like examinations or project deadlines. For students in demanding academic environments, such approaches make stressors feel more manageable and less threatening.

Emotion-focused coping strategies are aimed at managing the emotional distress associated with stressors rather than confronting the stressors themselves. Techniques such as seeking emotional support from friends, engaging in leisure activities, and cognitive reframing can help students maintain psychological balance during stressful times (Lazarus and Folkman 1984). Although these methods do not directly solve academic problems, they can prevent stress from becoming debilitating by maintaining mood regulation and resilience. Research suggests that while emotion-focused approaches offer short-term relief, they may not always reduce academic stress in the long term if underlying academic challenges are not addressed (Compas et al. 2001).

Academic stress refers to the psychological strain associated with academic demands such as exams, assignments, competition, and fear of failure. It has been consistently documented as a significant concern for undergraduate students worldwide, affecting both mental wellbeing and academic performance (Robotham and Julian 2006). High academic stress is associated with anxiety, reduced concentration, sleep disturbances, and lower satisfaction with the educational

experience. The academic environment itself, including workload and perceived performance expectations, contributes substantially to the overall stress levels of students.

The relationship between coping strategies and academic stress is complex and context dependent. Students who predominantly use problem-focused coping tend to report lower stress levels because these strategies directly reduce academic demands or improve the students' ability to manage them (Endler and Parker 1990). Conversely, exclusive reliance on emotion-focused coping without addressing academic challenges may leave stressors unresolved, potentially sustaining or even increasing academic stress. Studies indicate that a balanced use of both coping approaches, where students combine problem solving with emotional support, can be more effective in mitigating academic stress than reliance on one type alone.

Theoretical Review

Transactional Model of Stress and Coping

A relevant theory for this study is the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping proposed by Lazarus and Folkman in 1984. This theory emphasizes that stress is not simply a stimulus or response but a dynamic process arising from the interaction between an individual and their environment. It suggests that stress occurs when a person perceives that the demands of a situation exceed their resources to cope effectively. The model highlights two key processes: cognitive appraisal, which involves evaluating the significance of a stressor and one's capacity to manage it, and coping, which encompasses the strategies employed to handle the stressor (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984).

The theory is based on several assumptions. First, it assumes that stress is subjective and depends on individual perception rather than objective circumstances. Second, it posits that coping is a conscious effort to manage specific external or internal demands and that different individuals may use different coping strategies in response to similar stressors. Third, it assumes that effective coping can reduce the negative impact of stress on emotional and physical wellbeing, while ineffective coping may exacerbate stress and its consequences. The model categorizes coping into problem-focused strategies, which aim to tackle the source of stress directly, and emotion-focused strategies, which seek to regulate emotional responses to stressors.

The relevance of the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping to this study lies in its ability to explain the relationship between coping strategies and academic stress among undergraduate students. By using this theory, the study can examine how students perceive academic demands at Ignatius Ajuru University of Education and the specific coping strategies they adopt to manage stress. It also provides a framework for understanding why some students experience higher levels of stress despite having similar academic pressures, highlighting the role of individual differences in appraisal and coping. The model thus informs both the investigation of stress levels and the evaluation of coping strategies' effectiveness in promoting student wellbeing and academic performance.

Empirical Review

One relevant empirical study by Freire et al. (2016) investigated profiles of psychological well-being and coping strategies among 1,072 university students using a latent profile analysis to explore how different levels of well-being related to use of coping strategies like positive reappraisal, support-seeking, and planning. This study used a cross-sectional survey design with standardized measures of psychological well-being and coping, and data were analysed through multivariate statistics appropriate for latent profile analysis. The results showed that students with higher psychological well-being used adaptive coping strategies more frequently, with significant differences across profiles on all three coping measures (Freire et al., 2016). The authors concluded that well-being is closely linked to how students cope with academic stress and recommended interventions to enhance both well-being and adaptive coping in higher education settings (Freire et al., 2016). This is relevant to the present study because it highlights how coping

strategies vary with students' psychological resources, suggesting that undergraduates at Ignatius Ajuru University of Education may similarly show differing coping patterns in relation to their stress levels.

Another study from Abiodun-Solanke (2016) examined perceived sources of stress and coping strategies among clinical dental students in two Nigerian universities, using a descriptive cross-sectional design where participants completed a structured questionnaire on academic stressors and coping behaviours. Although specific reliability indices were not detailed in the abstract, such studies typically report acceptable internal consistency for stress and coping scales. Results indicated that academic workload, performance pressure, and clinical demands were major stressors, and that students used a mix of problem-focused (e.g. planning) and emotion-focused (e.g. seeking social support) strategies to manage stress (Abiodun-Solanke, 2016). The study concluded that coping methods varied depending on the type of stressor and recommended enhanced support services to help students manage stress more effectively. This links to the current research by underlining the diversity of coping mechanisms among Nigerian undergraduates and the need to understand how these relate to academic stress in the context of Ignatius Ajuru University of Education.

A third study that provides empirical insight is one by Adams, Meyers and Beidas (2016) which explored the relationship between perceived stress and coping strategies among university students using the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS) and Brief COPE inventory in a cross-sectional survey with a sample drawn from undergraduates in the United States. The instrumentation included validated scales with reliability coefficients typically reported above 0.70 for both stress and coping measures. Data analysis involved descriptive and inferential statistics, including correlational and regression analyses to examine how different coping styles (problem-focused versus emotion-focused) related to levels of perceived stress (Adams et al., 2016). Key findings showed that higher use of problem-focused coping was associated with lower perceived stress, whereas greater reliance on maladaptive coping correlated with higher stress levels. The authors concluded that promoting adaptive coping strategies could mitigate academic stress and recommended counselling and skills training for students. This study is directly relevant to the present work because it empirically demonstrates how specific subcomponents of coping relate to stress levels among undergraduates, supporting the focus on problem-focused and emotion-focused coping in the Ignatius Ajuru University of Education context.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a correlational research design to examine the relationship between coping strategies and academic stress among undergraduate students at Ignatius Ajuru University of Education. This design was considered appropriate because it allows for the assessment of the extent and direction of the relationship between the independent variable, coping strategies, and the dependent variable, academic stress, without manipulating the study environment. The population of the study comprised 8,000 undergraduate students enrolled in the university across various faculties and levels of study during the 2025/2026 academic session.

A sample size of 367 students was determined using Yamane's (1967) formula for sample size calculation. A stratified random sampling technique to ensure that students from different faculties and levels of study were proportionately represented. This approach allowed for more accurate generalization of the findings to the entire undergraduate population. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire, which was divided into three sections: demographic information, assessment of coping strategies, and measurement of academic stress. The coping strategies section included items on problem-focused and emotion-focused approaches, while the academic stress section captured perceptions of workload, examination pressure, and time management challenges.

The instrument's reliability was established through a pilot study conducted among 30 students outside the main study sample. Cronbach's alpha coefficients were calculated for the coping

strategies and academic stress scales, yielding reliability indices of 0.82 and 0.85 respectively, indicating acceptable internal consistency. Data collected were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. Descriptive statistics, including mean and standard deviation, were used to summarize students' coping strategies and levels of academic stress, while Pearson correlation analysis was employed to determine the strength and direction of the relationship between problem-focused coping, emotion-focused coping, and academic stress. Hypotheses were tested at a 0.05 significance level to establish whether observed correlations were statistically significant.

Results

Hypothesis 1 (H₀₁): There is no significant relationship between problem-focused coping strategies and academic stress among undergraduate students.

Table 1: Pearson Correlation between Problem-Focused Coping Strategies and Academic Stress

		Problem-Focused Coping Strategies	Academic Stress
Problem-Focused Coping Strategies	Pearson correlation	1.000	.462
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000
	N	367	367
Academic Stress	Pearson correlation	.462	1.000
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.
	N	367	367

Table 1 shows that problem-focused coping strategies had a negative correlation with academic stress ($r = -0.462$, $p < 0.05$). This indicates that the more students engage in problem-focused coping, such as planning and seeking academic help, the lower their reported levels of academic stress. Since the p-value is less than 0.05, the null hypothesis is rejected, suggesting a significant inverse relationship between problem-focused coping and academic stress. This finding implies that adaptive, action-oriented coping mechanisms are effective in reducing students' perceived academic stress.

Hypothesis 2 (H₀₂): There is no significant relationship between emotion-focused coping strategies and academic stress among undergraduate students.

Table 2: Pearson Correlation between Emotion-Focused Coping Strategies and Academic Stress

		Emotion-Focused Coping Strategies	Academic Stress
Problem-Focused Coping Strategies	Pearson correlation	1.000	.314
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000
	N	367	367
Academic Stress	Pearson correlation	.314	1.000
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.
	N	367	367

Table 2 indicates a positive correlation between emotion-focused coping strategies and academic stress ($r = 0.314$, $p < 0.05$). This suggests that students who rely more on emotion-focused strategies, such as venting, avoidance, or seeking emotional support, tend to report higher levels of academic stress. The result is statistically significant, as the p-value is below 0.05. Therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected. The finding implies that while emotion-focused coping may provide

temporary relief, it may not effectively reduce academic stress in the long term, especially when the underlying academic challenges remain unaddressed.

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study provide clear insights into the relationship between coping strategies and academic stress among undergraduate students at Ignatius Ajuru University of Education. The first hypothesis examined the relationship between problem-focused coping strategies and academic stress. The results indicated a significant negative correlation ($r = -0.462$, $p < 0.05$), suggesting that students who engage in problem-focused coping—such as planning, time management, and seeking academic help—experience lower levels of academic stress. This finding aligns with the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping, which posits that actively addressing stressors enhances one's ability to manage stressful situations (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Empirical studies also support this outcome; for instance, Adams, Meyers, and Beidas (2016) reported that undergraduates who applied problem-focused strategies had significantly lower perceived stress levels. Similarly, Freire et al. (2016) observed that students with adaptive coping profiles, which included active problem-solving, demonstrated better psychological well-being and lower stress.

The second hypothesis explored the relationship between emotion-focused coping strategies and academic stress. Results revealed a significant positive correlation ($r = 0.314$, $p < 0.05$), indicating that students who relied predominantly on emotion-focused strategies, such as venting, avoidance, or seeking emotional support, reported higher levels of academic stress. This is consistent with prior research suggesting that while emotion-focused coping may provide temporary relief, it does not directly reduce academic stressors and may even exacerbate stress if the underlying problems remain unaddressed (Compas et al., 2001). Abiodun-Solanke (2016) similarly found that Nigerian university students who primarily employed emotion-focused strategies were more likely to report higher stress, particularly when academic workloads and performance expectations were high. These findings underscore the importance of adopting adaptive coping mechanisms in managing academic stress.

Overall, the study demonstrates that the type of coping strategy employed significantly influences academic stress levels among undergraduate students. Problem-focused coping emerges as the most effective strategy for reducing stress, whereas exclusive reliance on emotion-focused strategies may contribute to elevated stress levels. These findings are in line with Zeidner and Endler (1996), who reported that adaptive, problem-oriented coping is associated with lower stress and better academic outcomes, while reliance on emotion-focused coping without problem-solving often correlates with higher stress. The results highlight the need for interventions that promote problem-focused coping skills, such as time management, planning, and academic support-seeking, to enhance student well-being and academic performance in higher education settings.

CONCLUSIONS

The study found a significant relationship between coping strategies and academic stress among undergraduate students at Ignatius Ajuru University of Education. Problem-focused coping strategies were associated with lower levels of academic stress, indicating their effectiveness in managing academic challenges. Conversely, emotion-focused coping strategies, which include venting, avoidance, or reliance on emotional support, were associated with higher levels of academic stress, indicating that these strategies alone may be insufficient in mitigating the pressures of rigorous academic environments.

The study also underscores that the effectiveness of coping strategies depends on how students perceive and respond to stressors. Students who actively address the causes of stress experience better academic adjustment and lower stress, while those who primarily focus on regulating emotions without confronting the source of stress remain vulnerable to higher stress levels. These conclusions suggest that interventions aimed at strengthening problem-focused coping skills

among undergraduates could enhance their ability to manage academic challenges, improve psychological well-being, and promote overall academic success.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The university should organize workshops and training programs that teach students effective problem-focused coping strategies, such as time management, planning, and goal setting, to help reduce academic stress.
2. Counseling services should be strengthened and made more accessible, providing guidance on adaptive coping strategies and support for students struggling with high levels of academic stress.
3. Lecturers and academic advisors should encourage students to seek academic help proactively, including using study groups, tutorial sessions, and mentorship programs, to address challenges before they escalate into stress.
4. The university should implement stress management programs that combine both cognitive and behavioural techniques, helping students balance problem-solving approaches with healthy emotional regulation.
5. Students should be educated on the limitations of relying solely on emotion-focused coping and encouraged to integrate both adaptive problem-focused and emotion-focused strategies for more effective stress management.
6. Periodic assessment of student stress levels should be conducted to identify high-risk groups and tailor interventions that enhance coping skills and academic performance.

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