Mental Distress, Coping Strategies, and Academic Achievement among University Students

DOI: 10.46932/sfjdv5n2-034

Received on: January 02nd, 2024
Accepted on: February 22nd, 2024

Anne Kathure Ntoiti
PhD Student in Educational Psychology
Institution: School of Education and Lifelong Learning, Kenyatta University
Address: P.O. box 1639-60200, Meru, Kenya
E-mail: ntoiti@nancy@yahoo.com

Edward Munyengwo Kigen
PhD in Educational Psychology
Institution: School of Education and Lifelong Learning, Kenyatta University
Address: P.O. Box 43844-00100 Nairobi, Kenya
E-mail: kigen.edward@ku.ac.ke

Theresia Kavuli Kinai
PhD in Educational Psychology
Institution: School of Education and Lifelong Learning, Kenyatta University
Address: P.O. Box 43844-00100 Nairobi, Kenya
E-mail: kinai.theresia@ku.ac.ke

Lucy Lugo Mawang
PhD in Educational Psychology
Institution: School of Education and Lifelong Learning, Kenyatta University
Address: P.O. Box 43844-00100 Nairobi, Kenya
E-mail: mawang.lucy@ku.ac.ke

ABSTRACT
Emerging research suggests that the global prevalence of youth mental distress has increased considerably during COVID-19 pandemic. Mental health among Kenyan Youth had already been deteriorating prior to the pandemic. This is largely attributed to academic pressure, financial constraints, interpersonal relations, and adjustment to university environment. Negative coping strategies, such as alcohol and substance use, adversely affect academic advancement, and mostly lead to students drop out. It is often unclear what preventive measures and interventions might be effective for university students. This study (a) examines the relationship among mental distress and undergraduate students’ academic achievement and (b) assesses the role of coping strategies in this relationship. The study adopted a descriptive survey and correlational research design. Participants were 277 students (Females = 52%, Males = 48%) randomly sampled from four universities in Kenya (two public and two private). Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the relevant authorities. The majority (91.3%) were aged above 18 years. Self-report Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scale-21 Items (DASS-21) and Stress Coping Strategies Questionnaire (SCSQ) were adopted to measure mental health and coping strategies, respectively. Students indicated their Grade Point Average (GPA) as shown in the university system. Findings indicated that a significant negative correlation was established between overall mental distress and GPA (r = -.15, p = .01). Unexpectedly, coping strategies did not mediate the association between mental distress and academic achievement as measured by the GPA. The findings are discussed in relation to previous studies and implications for university education.
Keywords: mental distress, stress, anxiety, depression, stress coping strategies, academic achievement.

1 INTRODUCTION

The demand for university education in Kenya has increased tremendously over the years. However, studies show that transition to the university is a major life-altering event which may heightened stress or mental distress among students. These arise from the academic challenges and changes in lifestyle and social environment (Elias et al. 2011; Yikealo & Tareke, 2018). World Health Organization considers mental health as a state in which an individual can deal with the challenges of life, in order to live a fully functional and productive life. Thus, mental health is very crucial in the lives of university students because their academic performance, social wellbeing, and day-to-day success depend to a large extent on its status (Mortier et al., 2018). The current World Health Organization Mental Health Survey has revealed that the number of students with severe psychological issues continued to rise in the campuses. However, most students do not seek treatment for psychological issues (Mortier et al., 2018). Elias et al. (2011) study found a significant but weak negative relationship between undergraduate students’ stress level and their academic achievement. Studies also indicate that female students experienced higher mental distress levels than males (Brown; 2018; Pierceall & Keim, 2007).

Many universities in Kenya reported an increased number of suicide and homicide cases among students over the last few years and especially in 2017 and 2018. According to Osanya and Junior (2019), documented cases in Kenya revealed that nearly 20 university students across the country committed suicide between 2014 and 2018. University students were also involved in strikes which caused enormous destruction of university assets and even death of some students. Such incidences may be partly attributed to the existence of mental distress mainly caused by economic constraints, interpersonal relations, stress, and exams anxiety among other reasons. Furthermore, studies have shown that most university students who struggle with depression and other mental illnesses are neglected with tragic results, raising concerns among university management, friends, and family (Osanya & Junior, 2019). Recently, Covid-19 pandemic brought changes and demands which students, parents, or guardians had not anticipated. University students were forced to go for a long, unprecedented break which may have caused untold anxiety, stress, and financial constraints. The uncertainty of when universities would open, challenges that were brought by online learning and examination schedules had an impact on the mental health and academic achievement of the students.

Coping strategies refer to the specific efforts both behavioural and psychological that individuals employ to master, tolerate, and minimize stressful life events. Students used a variety of stress coping strategies, which may be considered as adaptive or maladaptive (Osanya & Junior, 2019; Yikealo &
Tareke, 2018). College students have cited seeking social support from family and friends, problem solving, relaxation, and physical exercise among healthy activities used to cope with stress. They indicated that escape avoidance behaviours including substance use, smoking, consumption of alcohol, and unhealthy diet are maladaptive (Brown, 2018; Deasy et al. 2014). According to Osanya and Junior, many youths in Kenya resort to experimenting with various substances such as alcohol and drugs, which make them vulnerable to suicidal behaviour. Moreover, maladaptive coping strategies, often result in elevated psychological distress and adversely affect academic advancement, and mostly lead to students drop out (Evans et al., 2018 Deasy et al., 2014). According to Brown (2018), adaptive coping strategies enhances students’ resilience and results in positive learning practice such as improved class attendance, persistence, and participation despite academic challenges. Thus, it is important to establish interventions that might be effective for university students. This study hypothesized that adaptive stress coping strategies may mediating the relationship between mental distress and academic achievement of undergraduate students.

2 STUDY OBJECTIVES

The main objective of this study is to examine the mental distress levels, stress copying strategies and academic achievement of undergraduate university students in Kenya. In specific, this study aims:

1. To determine the mental distress levels of the undergraduate students.
2. To establish the relationship between mental distress and academic achievement of undergraduate students.
3. To examine the relationship between stress coping strategies and academic achievement of undergraduate students.
4. To establish the interrelationship between mental distress, stress coping strategies and academic achievement of undergraduate students.

3 RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

For this study, there were four hypotheses.

H₀₁: There is no significant relationship between undergraduate students’ mental distress level and academic achievement.

H₀₂: There is no significant relationship between undergraduate students’ stress coping strategies and academic achievement.

H₀₃: There is no significant interrelationship between mental distress, stress coping strategies and academic achievement of undergraduate students.
4 MATERIALS AND METHODS

4.1 PARTICIPANTS

Participants were 277 (Females = 52%, Males = 48%), randomly selected from 2nd Year (49.8%) and 3rd Year (50.2%) undergraduate students drawn from across the university faculties in two private (49.5%) and two public (50.5%) universities in Kenya. Names of the Universities were concealed because of ethical considerations. Majority of participants (91.3%) were aged above 18 years.

4.2 MEASURES

Quantitative data was collected by administering two self-report questionnaires to the study participants. Mental distress was measured using the Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scale-21 Items (DASS-21: Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995). The DASS-21 comprised three sub-scales designed to assess participants’ emotional states in three specific dimensions of depression (e.g., I felt that I had nothing to look forward to), anxiety (e.g., I felt scared without any good reason) and stress (e.g., I tended to over-react to situations). Each sub-scale contained 7 items and was rated on a four-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 0 = (Did not apply to me at all) to 3 = (Applied to me very much or most of the time). Scores for depression, anxiety and stress were calculated by summing the scores for the relevant items and interpreted as either normal, mild, moderate, severe, or extremely severe.

The researchers developed a Stress Coping Strategies Questionnaire (SCSQ), which required the respondents to indicate their level of utilization of adaptive stress copying strategies (e.g., when faced with difficulties, pastoral care is an option for me) as well as maladaptive stress copying strategies (e.g., Isolating myself from everybody). The SCSQ comprised 11 items rated on a five-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 = (Never) to 5 = (Very often). The items representing maladaptive stress copying strategy were reverse scored. Finally, the overall stress coping strategy was calculated by summing the scores.

4.3 ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

Academic achievement of the undergraduate students was measured by self-reported cumulative Grade Point Average (GPA), for the immediate past two semesters. The study adopted a descriptive survey and correlational research design. Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the all the relevant authorities.

5 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Before testing the hypotheses, we established that all the preliminary parametric assumptions were met. All statistical tests were carried out using IBM SPSS v.25 with an alpha level set at 0.05.
5.1 Academic Achievement of the Participants

The participants' cumulative GPA ranged from 1.2 to 4.0 with a mean of 2.970 (Std Error = 0.510). The first objective was to determine the mental distress levels of the undergraduate students.

Table 1. Mental Distress Levels of Undergraduate Students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Depression</th>
<th>Anxiety</th>
<th>Stress</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Range</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Normal</td>
<td>0 - 9</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>27.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mild</td>
<td>10 - 13</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>17.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>14 - 20</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>22.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Severe</td>
<td>21 - 27</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>20.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extremely severe</td>
<td>28 &amp; &gt;</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>11.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total                  | 277       | 100     | 277     | 100      | 277     | 100    |

Source: Questionnaire administered by Anne Kathure Ntoiti

The findings in Table 1 indicated that participants reported normal to extremely severe mental distress in all the three dimensions of depression, anxiety, and stress. Majority of the participants reported moderate to extremely severe levels of depression and anxiety. While most participants had normal levels of stress.

5.2 Relationship Between Undergraduate Students’ Mental Distress and Academic Achievement

To address the first research hypothesis, Pearson product-moment correlation was computed to examine the relationship between participants’ mental distress academic achievement. It was hypothesized that there is no significant relationship between undergraduate students’ mental distress level and academic achievement.

Table 2. Correlation between Mental Distress and Academic Achievement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Academic Achievement</th>
<th>Pearson’s correlation</th>
<th>Sig. (2-tailed)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overall Mental distress</td>
<td>-0.15**</td>
<td>0.001</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: n = 277; ** P < 0.01 (2-tailed)
Source: Questionnaire administered by Anne Kathure Ntoiti

The results in Table 2 showed that overall mental distress was significantly and negatively correlated to academic achievement (r = -0.15, p = 0.01). This implies that high levels of mental distress, may result in a low academic achievement. Based on this finding, the first null hypothesis of this study, H₀₁: which
stated that there is no significant relationship between undergraduate students’ mental distress level and academic achievement, was rejected. This finding is in line with the past research (Elias et al. 2011).

5.3 RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS’ STRESS COPING STRATEGIES AND ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

To address the second research hypothesis, Pearson product-moment correlation was computed to examine the relationship between participants’ stress coping strategies academic achievement. It was hypothesized that there is no significant relationship between undergraduate students’ stress coping strategies and academic achievement.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stress Coping Strategies</th>
<th>Academic Achievement</th>
<th>Pearson correlation</th>
<th>Sig. (2-tailed)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>When faced with difficulties, Pastoral care is an option for me</td>
<td>-.067</td>
<td>.264</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spending time with friends</td>
<td>.057</td>
<td>.344</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listening to music</td>
<td>.077</td>
<td>.204</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doing physical exercise</td>
<td>-.058</td>
<td>.335</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drinking alcohol, smoking, &amp; using illegal drugs</td>
<td>-.106</td>
<td>.077</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Watching television and movies</td>
<td>.028</td>
<td>.647</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Games and sports</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>.384</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Singing and praying</td>
<td>.135*</td>
<td>.026</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isolating myself from everybody</td>
<td>-.017</td>
<td>.777</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spend a lot of time sleeping</td>
<td>-.017</td>
<td>.776</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surfing on the internet</td>
<td>-.045</td>
<td>.454</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall stress coping strategies</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.995</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: *Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed); N = 277
Source: Questionnaire administered by Anne Kathure Ntoiti

The results in Table 3 indicated a significant positive relationship between singing and praying as a stress coping strategy and academic achievement ($r = .135, p = .026$). However, the overall stress coping strategies had a non-significant correlation with academic achievement. Thus, the second null hypothesis, $H_02$: which stated that “There is no significant relationship between undergraduate students’ stress coping strategies and academic achievement” was accepted. The finding is not aligned to previous studies which have indicated that maladaptive coping strategies, often result in elevated psychological distress and adversely affect academic advancement, and even lead to students drop out (Evans et al., 2018; Deasy et al., 2014).
5.4 INTERRELATIONSHIP BETWEEN UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS’ MENTAL DISTRESS, STRESS COPING STRATEGIES AND ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

The third hypothesis of this study stated that there is no significant interrelationship between mental distress, stress coping strategies and academic achievement of undergraduate students. Pearson product-moment correlation was computed to examine the interrelationship among mental distress, stress coping strategies and academic achievement of undergraduate students. The results indicated that the overall mental distress was significantly and negatively correlated to academic achievement ($r = -0.15, p = 0.01$). However, there was no significant relationship between mental distress and stress coping strategies. Similarly, the relationship between overall stress coping strategy and undergraduate students’ academic achievement was non-significant. Based on this finding, the third null hypothesis of this study, $H_03$: which stated that there is no significant interrelationship between mental distress, stress coping strategies and academic achievement of undergraduate students, was adopted. This also indicates that the role of stress coping strategies in mediating the relationship between mental distress and academic achievement of undergraduate students, could not be assessed. However, previous studies showed that adaptive coping strategies such as seeking social support from family and friends tend to enhance students’ resilience and results in positive learning practice and outcomes (Brown, 2018). Hence, students should be encouraged to use adaptive coping strategies when faced with academic and life challenges.

6 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Mental distress has always been an issue among undergraduate students, and past research, finds mental distress to be significantly correlated to academic achievement. This study examined the mental distress levels of the undergraduate students in Kenya. Majority of the participants reported moderate to extremely severe levels of depression and anxiety, while most participants had normal levels of stress. There was a significant, but weak and negative relationship identified between mental distress and academic achievement. Based on these results, high mental distress levels, which also indicates deteriorating mental health in terms of depression, anxiety, and stress, may result in low academic achievement among undergraduate students. Therefore, students ought to be guided to reduce their mental distress levels, since this can enhance their academic achievement. The findings in this study showed a non-significant intercorrelation among undergraduate students’ mental distress, stress coping strategies and academic achievement stress coping strategies did not mediate the association between mental distress and academic achievement as measured by the GPA. Future studies may wish to look into this area and also establish mental distress interventions for the undergraduate students.
REFERENCES


