COPING STRATEGIES AND ACADEMIC STRESS OF UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS OF GUIDANCE AND COUNSELLING, UNIVERSITY OF UYO, AKWA IBOM STATE, NIGERIA

By
Hanson Manuabuchi Ukaegbu
&
Uduak Okokon Ekpenyong
Department of Guidance and Counselling
University of Uyo, Nigeria

Abstract
The study investigated the relationship between coping strategies and academic stress of Undergraduate Students of Guidance and Counselling, University of Uyo, Uyo, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. Three research questions and three corresponding null hypotheses guided the study. A correlational research design was adopted for the study. The population of the study consisted of 684 undergraduate regular students of Guidance and Counselling Department, University of Uyo, Uyo. A sample of 200 undergraduate students of Guidance and Counselling was selected for the study via stratified random sampling technique. Coping Strategies Questionnaire (CSQ) and Academic Stress Questionnaire for Undergraduate Students (ASQUS) were used for data collection. The instruments were face validated while the reliability coefficients of 0.72 and 0.71 were obtained for CSQ and ASQUS respectively. Pearson Product Moment Correlation statistics was used for data analysis at 0.05 level of significance. The results were that; there is a negative and no significant relationship between problem-focused coping strategy and academic stress of students; there is a significant positive relationship between emotion-focused coping strategy and academic stress of students; there is a significant negative relationship between social support-seeking coping strategy and academic stress of undergraduate students of guidance and counselling. Based on the findings of the study, conclusions were drawn and recommendations made among which is that universities and academic institutions in Nigeria should offer regular workshops and training sessions on time management, study skills, and effective problem-solving strategies to empower students in dealing with academic challenges.

Keywords: Coping, Strategies, Academic, Stress, Guidance, Counselling

Introduction
The academic environment in universities is often characterized by high levels of stress, which can significantly affect students' mental health, academic performance, and overall well-being. This is particularly true for students in guidance and counselling programmes, who are expected to develop competencies in managing both their own stress and that of others who approach them for assistance. Guidance and counselling students are expected to navigate coursework and practicum in school and non-school settings while providing emotional support to others. This intense combination of academic and emotional demands, according to Hayat, Shateri, Amini and Shokrpour (2021) often places these students at risk of stress and burnout. Academic stress is defined as the psychological strain associated with the demands and pressures of academic life (Meyer, 2021). Common sources of academic

stress include heavy workloads, deadlines, examinations, and the need to achieve high grades (Baker & Siryk, 2020). For guidance and counselling students, additional factors such as the academic demands of their field of study, the need for self-reflection, and the responsibility of applying theoretical knowledge to practice can intensify stress levels.

Guidance and counselling students face unique challenges that can exacerbate academic stress. The dual requirement of mastering theoretical knowledge while engaging in self-reflection and personal development places significant demands on these students (Deb, Strodl, & Sun., 2014). Furthermore, the expectation to model healthy coping behaviours can lead to additional pressure, creating a paradox where students feel compelled to manage their stress effectively and struggle to do so. Additionally, the emotional labour involved in learning to counsel others can lead to compassion fatigue and burnout, further complicating their stress management. Parker, Martin, Colmar and Liem (2020) opined that academic stress can lead to anxiety, depression, and decreased academic performance, making it a critical area for exploration. As future professionals responsible for assisting others in managing their mental health, it is crucial that guidance and counselling students develop effective coping strategies to mitigate stress and maintain emotional resilience. Understanding the coping strategies employed by guidance and counselling students, in response to academic stress is crucial for improving their training and supporting their future roles as professional guidance counsellors.

Coping strategies are the methods individuals use to manage stress and anxiety. Lazarus and Folkman's transactional model of stress and coping as cited in Iruloh and Ukaegbu (2017) distinguishes between problem-focused coping, which aims at addressing the source of stress and emotion-focused coping, which seeks to manage emotional responses to stressors. For students in guidance and counselling, effective coping strategies are vital not only for their own well-being but also for developing skills to assist future clients. Thus, in the context of this study, problem-focused coping, emotion-focused coping and social support-seeking coping strategies are investigated. Problem-focused coping strategy involves actively addressing the source of stress by organizing tasks, seeking information, or developing time-management skills to reduce the academic workload (Iruloh & Ukaegbu, 2017). For guidance and counselling students, this may include breaking down complex assignments into manageable steps or seeking clarification from instructors to alleviate stressor.

Emotion-focused coping refers to strategies aimed at managing emotional responses to stress rather than changing the situation itself. Common emotion-focused coping strategies include relaxation techniques, mindfulness practices, and engaging in hobbies to alleviate negative emotions associated with academic pressure (Watkins & Gold, 2019). For guidance students, managing emotional responses may also involve applying the therapeutic techniques they learn in their coursework, such as cognitive-behavioural strategies or self-reflection.

Social support-seeking is a coping strategy in which individuals seek assistance, comfort, or advice from others to help manage stress or difficult situations. This strategy involves reaching out to friends, family members, peers, or professionals for emotional, informational, or practical support. Social support not only provides emotional reassurance but also facilitates the sharing of strategies for overcoming academic challenges (Thoits, 2015). For guidance and counselling students, support from peers and faculty can provide both practical and emotional assistance, helping them feel more capable and understood in their academic journey. Furthermore, the effectiveness of specific coping strategies in

mitigating academic stress among these undergraduate guidance and counselling students is still underexplored. Identifying the most effective strategies and understanding how they can be taught and reinforced in academic settings is crucial for the development of effective support systems. Hence, this study was investigated to establish the relationship between coping strategies and academic stress of undergraduate students of guidance and counselling, University of Uyo, Uyo, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria.

Statement of the Problem

Academic stress is a prevalent issue among university students worldwide, and it can have a profound impact on their academic performance, emotional well-being, and overall mental health. Undergraduate students in guidance and counselling programmes, who are being trained to assist others in managing stress, are not immune to these challenges. At the University of Uyo, Uyo, the increasing academic workload, pressure to read and perform well in examination and the balancing of personal and academic responsibilities contribute to heightened stress levels among students pursuing guidance and counselling.

Despite being equipped with knowledge about coping strategies, these students may face unique stressors related to their coursework, practical training, and expectations to model effective counselling practices. This situation raises a critical concern regarding how these students cope with academic stress and whether they utilize effective strategies to manage their stress levels. Therefore, this study sought to investigate the coping strategies employed by undergraduate students of guidance and counselling, University of Uyo in response to academic stress. It will explore the types of stressors they face in their academic journey and assess how well their coping strategies align with their knowledge and training in counselling. This research is vital in understanding the intersection of academic stress and coping mechanisms in future counsellors, providing insights into how institutions can better support students in guidance and counselling programmes to foster their academic success and well-being.

Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of the study was to investigate the relationship between coping strategies and academic stress of undergraduate students of guidance and counselling, University of Uyo, Uyo, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. Specifically, the study sought to achieve the following objectives:

1. Establish the relationship between problem-focused coping strategy and academic stress of undergraduate students of guidance and counselling.
2. Find out the relationship between emotion-focused coping strategy and academic stress of undergraduate students of guidance and counselling.
3. Ascertain the relationship between social support-seeking coping strategy and academic stress of undergraduate students of guidance and counselling.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

1. What is the relationship between problem-focused coping strategy and academic stress of undergraduate students of guidance and counselling?
2. What is the relationship between emotion-focused coping strategy and academic stress of undergraduate students of guidance and counselling?

3. What is the relationship between social support-seeking coping strategy and academic stress of undergraduate students of guidance and counselling?

Research Hypotheses

The following research hypotheses guided the study:

1. There is no significant relationship between problem-focused coping strategy and academic stress of undergraduate students of guidance and counselling.
2. There is no significant relationship between emotion-focused coping strategy and academic stress of undergraduate students of guidance and counselling.
3. There is no significant relationship between social support-seeking coping strategy and academic stress of undergraduate students of guidance and counselling.

Theoretical Review

Transactional Model of Stress and Coping by Lazarus and Folkman (1984): Transactional Model of Stress and Coping was propounded by Richard Lazarus and Susan Folkman in 1984. The Transactional Model expands the traditional view of stress by emphasizing the dynamic relationship between individuals and their environment. Stress is not just an external force or an individual's internal reaction but a process where the person's cognitive and emotional responses shape their experience of a stressful event. This model places a strong emphasis on individual appraisal and coping as transactional processes. Lazarus and Folkman later expanded on their original model to include a broader spectrum of coping mechanisms. The focus is not just on problem- and emotion-focused coping, but also on avoidant coping (avoiding stressful situations) and meaning-focused coping (altering one's perception of the stressor by finding a personal meaning). These additions allow for a more nuanced understanding of coping, particularly for students facing academic stress in complex environments.

This model is particularly useful for understanding how Guidance and Counselling undergraduates respond to academic stress. The model allows for proper explanation on students cognitively assess their academic challenges (primary and secondary appraisal) and how they choose different coping strategies based on their resources, emotional state, and social context. For instance, a student might appraise an upcoming exam as a threat and adopt emotion-focused coping (such as avoidance or denial) or problem-focused coping (such as studying intensively). It also supports interventions that encourage adaptive coping strategies, potentially leading to a more positive academic experience.

Social Support Theory by Cohen and Wills (1985)

Social Support Theory was propounded by Cohen and Wills in 1985. Social Support Theory focuses on the beneficial impact that social relationships and networks can have on an individual's mental and physical well-being. The theory suggests that the presence of supportive relationships buffers individuals from the negative effects of stress, providing emotional, informational, and practical assistance. This support can come from various sources, such as family, friends, colleagues, or even professional support networks. One of the central ideas in this theory is that social support acts as a buffer against the negative effects of stress. The Social Support Theory is invaluable in exploring the role of interpersonal relationships in helping Guidance and Counselling undergraduates cope with academic stress. This theory explained explicitly the relevance of supportive peers, mentors,

family members on reduction of academic stress, improving coping mechanisms and academic outcomes. Furthermore, the theory can be used to assess whether certain types of social support (e.g., emotional or informational) are more effective than others in a university setting. For instance, students may rely more on informational support (advice about exams, study techniques) from peers or department, rather than emotional support, which could be crucial for navigating academic pressures.

Empirical Studies

The impact of coping strategies on stress among medical students was conducted by Smith and Tan (2020). A sample of 150 medical students was selected for the study via convenience sampling technique. Coping Inventory for Stressful Situations (CISS) and Medical Students' Stress Inventory (MSSI) were used for data collection. ANOVA and correlation analysis were used for data analysis at 0.05 level of significance. The study found that medical students who utilized problem-focused coping techniques exhibited lower levels of stress compared to those using emotion-focused strategies. A similar study aimed at investigating the relationship between coping strategies and stress among university students was carried out by Kumar and Choudhury (2017). The study utilized a sample of 180 university students selected via purposive sampling procedure. Coping Orientation to Problems Experienced (COPE) Inventory and Stress Coping Questionnaire were used for data collection. Path analysis and chi-square tests were used for data analysis at 0.05 level of significance. Analysis of data revealed that problem-focused coping was directly linked to lower perceived academic stress and better academic adaptation.

Fernandez and Adams (2022) studied the relationship between coping strategies and academic stress in secondary school students using a sample of 400 secondary school students who were randomly selected. Academic Stress Scale (ASS) and Coping Strategies for Adolescents Questionnaire were used for data collection. Factor analysis and hierarchical regression statistics were used for data analysis. Analysis of data showed that students who engaged in problem-focused coping strategies exhibited lower levels of stress, especially under high academic demands. The study of the relationship between emotion-focused coping, academic stress, and academic performance was carried out by Smith and Johnson (2021). A sample of 250 undergraduate students was selected for the study using random sampling method. Perceived Stress Scale (PSS), Emotion-Focused Coping Inventory were used for data collection while descriptive statistics, correlation analysis and regression analysis were used for data analysis at 0.05 level of significance. The study found that students who used emotion-focused coping strategies reported higher levels of stress but lower academic performance. Emotional regulation strategies were negatively correlated with academic performance.

Zhao and Wang (2020) studied coping strategies and their impact on academic stress in high school students using a sample of 300 high school students who were selected via stratified random sampling technique. Coping Strategy Indicator (CSI) and Academic Stress Scale (ASS) were used for data collection while factor analysis and multiple regression statistics were used for data analysis at 0.05 level of significance. The study revealed that emotion-focused coping (especially avoidance) was significantly associated with higher levels of academic stress. Another study was conducted by Williams and Zhou (2018) on the role of social support in managing academic stress. A sample of 150 graduate students was selected for the study using random sampling procedure. Perceived Stress Scale (PSS) and Social Support Inventory (SSI) were used for data collection. Structural Equation Modeling

(SEM) was used for data analysis. The study revealed that social support significantly moderated the relationship between academic stress and well-being. High social support buffered against stress.

Turner and Carter (2017) studied the impact of coping strategies, specifically social support-seeking, on academic stress using a sample of 300 high school students selected via convenience sampling method. Coping Inventory for Stressful Situations (CISS) and Academic Stress Scale were used for data collection. ANOVA and Pearson's correlation were used for data analysis at .05 level of significance. It was revealed among others that students who engaged in seeking social support had lower levels of perceived academic stress compared to those who used avoidance or self-blame. Greene and Brooks (2020) studied social support and its impact on academic stress in undergraduate students. A sample of 200 undergraduates was selected for the study using convenience sampling technique. Social Support Scale (SSS) and Academic Stress Scale were used for data collection. Linear regression analysis and correlation statistics were used for data analysis. The study showed that social support had a direct impact on reducing academic stress among undergraduates. Emotional support was the most effective type of support.

Based on the empirical studies reviewed, the researchers observed that while there is a growing body of research on academic stress and coping strategies, there remains a paucity of studies specifically targeting guidance and counselling students. Most existing research has focused on broader student populations, leaving a gap in understanding the unique experiences and needs of those in the guidance and counselling field of study. Additionally, to the best of the researchers' knowledge, no empirical research has been carried out on the relationship between coping strategies and academic stress of guidance and counselling undergraduate students, University of Uyo, Uyo, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. Thus this present study was carried out to fill the existing gap as observed in the past empirical studies reviewed.

Research Design
Correlational design was adopted for the study. According to Wali (2002), correlation research designs are useful in determining whether two or more variables are related. Thus correlational research design is more suitable for this study because the researcher intended to establish the relationship between coping strategies and academic stress of guidance and counselling undergraduate students of University of Uyo, Uyo, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria.

Population of the Study
The population of the study consisted of six hundred and eighty four (684) undergraduate regular students of Guidance and Counselling Department, University of Uyo, Uyo in the 2023/2024 academic session. This figure was obtained from the Department of Guidance and Counselling, University of Uyo, Uyo, 2025).

Sample and Sampling Technique
Stratified random sampling technique was used to select the sample of the study. In the first instance, undergraduate regular students of Guidance and Counselling, University of Uyo, Uyo were divided into strata based on year of study (that is, years one, two, three and four). Thereafter, 29% of the students' population in each year of study was selected for the study. This gave a total sample size of 200 students. Thus, a sample of 200 undergraduate regular students of Guidance and Counselling, University of Uyo, Uyo was used for the study.

Instrumentation

Two researcher-made instruments entitled "Coping Strategies Questionnaire" (CSQ) and Academic Stress Questionnaire for Undergraduate Students" (ASQUS) were used for data collection. CSQ consisted of eighteen items. Six items measured each of problem focused coping, emotion focused coping and social support-seeking coping strategies. The second instrument (ASQUS) consisted of twenty items which measured academic stress of undergraduate students of guidance and counselling, University of Uyo, Uyo. The items contained in the two instruments were responded to on a four-point rating scale namely Strongly (SA) = 4 points, Agree (A) = 3 points, Disagree (D) = 2 points, and Strongly Disagree (SD) = 1 point.

Validation of the Instrument

Face validity of the instruments was carried out by three (3) experts. Two experts in Department of Guidance and Counselling and one from the Department of Psychological Foundations of Education, Faculty of Education, University of Uyo, Uyo validated the instruments.

Reliability of the Instrument

To determine the internal consistency reliability of the instruments, the researcher randomly selected 25 undergraduate students of guidance and counselling, University of Uyo, Uyo who were part of the population but not part of the study sample to respond to the instruments. Data generated were subjected to inter-item analysis using Cronbach alpha statistics and reliability coefficients of .72 and .71 were obtained for CSQ and ASQUS respectively.

Method of Data Analysis

Pearson Product Moment Correlation statistics was used to answer the research questions and also test the null hypotheses at .05 alpha level of significance. Data were subjected to analysis using Social Science Statistical Package (SPSS) version 22.0.

Results

Table 1: Pearson product moment correlation between problem focused coping strategy and academic stress of undergraduate students of guidance and counselling, University of Uyo, Uyo

Variables	n	r-value	p-value	Remark
Problem focused coping (X)				
	200	-.71	2.549	Not Sig.
Academic stress (Y)				

p>.05

The result in Table 1 shows a correlation coefficient value of -.71, depicting a negative relationship between problem-focused coping strategy and academic stress of undergraduate students of guidance and counselling. More so, the test of corresponding hypothesis one reveals that the relationship between the independent and dependent variables is not statistically significant at .05 level of significance. Thus, there is no significant

relationship between problem focused coping strategy and academic stress of undergraduate students of guidance and counselling, University of Uyo, Uyo

Table 2: Pearson product moment correlation between emotion focused coping strategy and academic stress of undergraduate students of guidance and counselling, University of Uyo, Uyo

Variables	n	r-value	p-value	Remark
Emotion focused coping (X)				
	200	.73	.000	Sig.
Academic stress (Y)				

p<.05

The result in Table 2 shows a correlation coefficient value of .73 which depicts a positive relationship between emotion-focused coping strategy and academic stress of undergraduate students of guidance and counselling. More so, the test of corresponding hypothesis two reveals that the relationship between the independent and dependent variables is statistically significant at .05 level of significance. Thus, there is significant relationship between emotion focused coping strategy and academic stress of undergraduate students of guidance and counselling, University of Uyo, Uyo

Table 3: Pearson product moment correlation between social support-seeking coping strategy and academic stress of undergraduate students of guidance and counselling, University of Uyo, Uyo

Variables	n	r-value	p-value	Remark
Social support-seeking coping (X)				
	200	.77	.000	Sig.
Academic stress (Y)				

p<.05

The result in Table 3 shows a correlation coefficient value of .77, depicting a positive relationship between social support-seeking coping strategy and academic stress of undergraduate students of guidance and counselling. More so, the test of corresponding hypothesis three reveals that the relationship between the independent and dependent variables is statistically significant at .05 level of significance. Thus, there is significant relationship between social support-seeking coping strategy and academic stress of undergraduate students of guidance and counselling, University of Uyo, Uyo

Discussion of Findings
The finding that there is a negative relationship means that as students use problem-focused coping, their academic stress tends to decrease. This might suggest that students who employ problem-focused strategies to manage academic demands are able to alleviate some of the stress associated with those demands. However, since this relationship is not significant, it suggests that, while a negative trend may be observed, the effect is weak or inconsistent across the sample of students. This could be due to the fact that problem-focused coping involves taking direct actions to deal with or resolve a stressful situation. In

academic contexts, this could include strategies such as organizing study schedules, breaking down tasks into manageable steps, focusing on solving problems when faced with an academic challenge and so forth. This present finding lends support to Smith and Tan (2020), Kumar and Choudhury (2017) and Fernandez and Adams (2022) who in their study revealed that students who engaged in problem-focused coping strategies exhibited lower levels of stress, especially under high academic demands.The result that there is a significant positive relationship between emotion-focused coping strategy and academic stress among undergraduate students in guidance and counselling suggests that students who tend to use emotion-focused coping strategies are more likely to experience higher levels of academic stress. Emotion-focused coping strategies involve managing the emotional distress caused by a situation rather than addressing the problem itself. These strategies include behaviours like avoidance, denial, or rumination. The findings could be due to the fact emotion-focused coping strategies help individuals manage their emotional reactions to stressors, but they do not directly address the source of stress itself. For example, when a student faces academic pressures, using emotion-focused strategies like avoidance or denial may temporarily reduce the emotional discomfort, but it does not solve the underlying problem (e.g., incomplete assignments, exam pressure). This present finding agrees with Smith and Johnson (2021), and Zhao and Wang (2020) who in their study reported that emotion-focused coping (especially avoidance) was significantly associated with higher levels of academic stress.

The negative relationship between social support-seeking coping strategies and academic stress means that as students use social support-seeking strategies more (such as seeking help or talking to others when stressed), their level of academic stress tends to decrease. In other words, the more they engage in these coping behaviours, the less academic stress they experience. The relationship between the use of social support-seeking coping strategies and academic stress is described as statistically significant. This suggests that the findings are not likely due to random chance but are instead likely reflective of a true pattern. The statistical significance means that the observed relationship between these two factors is reliable and meaningful, based on the data collected in the study. Seeking support from others can help buffer the impact of stress, reducing its negative effects. This may have also contributed to the present finding which is in agreement with Williams and Zhou (2018), Turner and Carter (2017), and Greene and Brooks (2020) who had earlier reported that social support had a direct impact on reducing academic stress among undergraduates.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of the study, it can be concluded that; although problem-focused coping may have a potential influence on reducing academic stress, the effect is not strong enough to be considered meaningful in a statistical context for undergraduate students of guidance and counselling; students who use emotion-focused coping strategies tend to experience higher levels of academic stress; students who actively seek social support tend to experience lower levels of academic stress. It highlights the importance of support systems and the role of social networks in mitigating stress among students.

Recommendations

The following recommendations were made based on the findings of the study:
1. Universities and academic institutions in Nigeria should offer regular workshops and training sessions on time management, study skills, and effective problem-solving strategies to empower students in dealing with academic challenges.

2. It is recommended that students be guided towards healthier emotional regulation strategies. Counselling services should help students recognize when their coping mechanisms might be exacerbating stress and offer alternative strategies that promote better emotional resilience, such as mindfulness or cognitive reframing techniques.

3. Universities in Nigeria should foster environments where students feel comfortable seeking support from peers, faculty, and counselling services. Creating a more open and accessible culture of support can help students feel less stressed academically and more connected to their community.

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