

# Thematic Analysis of Stress and Coping within a Defined Student Population

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## ABSTRACT

**Introduction:** The study aimed to explore how university students experience stress and the ways by which they cope with stress. **Materials & Methods:** A qualitative design was adopted to conduct the study using purposive sampling amongst the University of South Wales students. Data was analyzed using the Thematic Analysis framework. **Results:** The most important causes of stress reported by the respondents were financial problems, intense course, unfriendly weather, assignment deadlines, time management and completing assignments on time. In terms of coping with stress, the respondents were able to describe a variety of strategies to cope with their stressful situations, such as exercising, going on walks, going to the gym, playing video games, socializing with friends, focused, mindfulness, using social platforms, scream out stress, lecturer advice, university support services, relaxation and listening to music. **Conclusion:** Students go through stress in various ways and engage in different coping strategies to deal with stress. **Keywords:** Stress, Coping, Thematic Analysis, and Student Population.

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## INTRODUCTION

University students are constantly prone to stress and they have to deal with it day by day <sup>[1]</sup>. University students are a class that is specifically subject to stress as a result of the metamorphosis that is accustomed to university life <sup>[2]</sup>. Physiological and psychological distress in divergent ways, in conjunction with academic output have been affected by stress among university students, this has led to an interest in the topic from researchers for many years now <sup>[3]</sup>. Consequently, university students go through numerous stressors from divergent points of origination in their academic life, and often as a result of disparities in personality traits, they react to these stressors in dissimilar manners <sup>[1,4]</sup>.

According to Lazarus and Folkman <sup>[5]</sup>, there are two main forms of coping strategies which are used to coping stressful circumstances: “problem-focused coping” and “emotion-focused coping”. The most effective is “Problem-focused coping”. It includes applying a clear exertion to amend or adapt to stressful situations of the external surroundings. “Emotion-focused coping”, mainly less effective, includes modifying a person’s assessments of the stressful condition to eradicate the essential to proceed into actions. When faced with stressful experiences people engage in either problem-focused or emotion-focused coping to deal with the stressor <sup>[5]</sup>.

However, in contrast to quantitative research, there is a limited amount of qualitative research examining the transition and the associated stress and coping behaviour among students <sup>[6]</sup>. Whereas quantitative data offers certain statistical advantages, it fails to explore and interrogate the meaning of participants’ unique experiences and conceptions on a specific topic <sup>[7]</sup>. Qualitative studies could, therefore, provide an in-depth understanding of the stress process and add a novel perspective by giving voice to participants’ unique experiences and conceptions of coping with academic stressors <sup>[8]</sup>. It is against the above-mentioned backdrop that this study aimed to explore how university students experience stress and the ways by which they cope with stress.

## **METHOD**

### **Study Design**

A qualitative design was adopted to conduct the study using a phenomenological approach because it enables the researcher to achieve the study aims as it focuses on participants' perceptions and experiences of the topic being explored. Phenomenology allows for in-depth examination, interpretation, and development of an understanding that leads to greater self-understanding, greater moral awareness and an appreciation of the views of others <sup>[9]</sup>.

### **Study Participants**

The study participants were university students who were both residents and non-residents at the University of South Wales. For inclusion, one had to be a student at the University of South Wales who at the time of data collection was available and consented to the study. Students at the University of South Wales who at the time of data collection were ill and did not consent to the study were excluded.

### **Sampling and Sample Size**

In this present study, a non-probability sampling technique adopting a purposive sampling method was used in selecting study participants on campus who were available and willing to take part. The participants were purposively selected from a total of 40 Masters of Clinical Psychology Students on the University of South Wales campus. A total of six students were selected, four females and two males with the ratio of females to males being 2:1. The age of the participants ranged between 25-35 years.

### **Data Collection**

This involved a qualitative data collection technique using an In-depth interview (IDI) with participants. Interview guides were used for the collection of qualitative data with students to gain insights into how they experience stress and ways by which they cope with stress.

### **Study Procedure**

A semi-structured interview lasting about 20-30 minutes was conducted with each participant in a private room on the University of South Wales campus. The interview responses were recorded with an audio recorder, and the audio files were labelled appropriately for easy retrieval. Each recording was transcribed and coded into categories based on consistent themes that emerged during the interview.

### **Data Analysis**

The interview transcripts were analyzed according to the framework for conducting Thematic Analysis outlined by Braun & Clarke <sup>[10]</sup>. The interview transcripts were read and re-read to ensure familiarity with the content of the interviews. Those sections of the interviews relevant to the research question were then coded according to their semantic and latent content; codes were generated in vivo rather than being derived from prior research or theories.

The data was analyzed for codes and major themes related to students' experience of stress and the ways they cope with stress by which they cope with stress. The process included data familiarization, generating codes, identifying recurring themes from major themes and defining the themes.

### **Ethical Consideration**

Permission to conduct this study was obtained from the School of Psychology and Therapeutic Studies Ethics Approval Panel at the University of South Wales. The study was performed by the Helsinki Declaration guidelines (The Helsinki Declaration guidelines are the World Medical Association (WMA) Declaration of Helsinki – Ethical Principles for Medical Research Involving Human Subjects).

Information was also provided to study participants about their rights and responsibilities including rights to confidentiality, voluntary participation, and the right to withdraw at any time if they so wished. Written informed consent was obtained from consenting participants. Interviews were conducted in private places at the University and all data were anonymous to ensure confidentiality.

## RESULTS

This chapter presents the results of the study. It is divided into two parts: An overview of the main themes of the analysis and a detailed account of each main theme.

### Main Themes Overview

The main themes developed from the codes obtained from ideas and issues within the interview data are; Stressors, Symptoms and Coping Strategies. These themes were developed from sub-themes by collapsing various codes into a broader form. The codes used to develop the theme stressors entail; burden, uncomfortable situations, worry about dissertation, adaptation as an international student, financial problems, desire for higher marks, intense course, high expectations from course, dilemma, not native English speaker, unfriendly weather, plagiarism issue, difficulty approaching people, assignment deadlines, time management and completing assignment on time.

Symptoms and Stressors are related in that both are themes generated from the responses of respondents with regard to the emotional and negative impact on students. The codes used to develop the theme symptoms include; unable to focus, frustration, tension, anger, ignoring people, nervousness, poor sleep pattern, uncomfortable, no appetite, lack of interest, depression, headaches and feeling overwhelmed.

Coping Strategies as a theme are also developed from codes such as; exercises, going on a walk, going to the gym, playing video games, socializing with friends, focused, mindfulness, using social platforms, screaming out stress, lecturer advice, university support services, relaxation and listening to music.

This theme is also related to the above themes (stressors and symptoms) as it centred on helping respondents dealing or adjust to their symptoms and the stressors that activate those symptoms, thereby helping them manage the symptoms caused by the stressors.

### Main Themes

#### Stressors

In as much as stressors, as a theme is a concern, a greater proportion of the participants were of the view that stressors mean burdens, uncomfortable situations, financial problems, desire for higher marks, intense courses, high expectations from the course, dilemma, unfriendly weather, plagiarism issue, assignment deadlines, time management and completing assignment on time. One participant opined that,

*"I think the whole course as a whole is challenging, its particular is one of the most challenging things I have done in a long time".*

This was supported by another participant who said that,

*"It is quite hard for me to both study and work at the same time, because whenever I am not in university, then I am tired, so I do not have time to complete my university work and I just feel like it is quite hard. I wish I did not have to work, and I could just concentrate on my studies and then I know I would perform better".*

Another participant also said, *"how to cope with the weather is another thing altogether, sometimes I can be in my room for two days without coming outside, yeah, I feel comfortable in my room. because it's warm".*

#### Symptoms

When participants were asked about the symptoms they experience when under stress, almost all of them mentioned frustration, tension, anger, ignoring people, nervousness, poor sleep patterns, uncomfortable, no appetite, lack of interest, feeling overwhelmed, depression and headaches. To explain the signs and symptoms they exhibit when under stress, a participant said,

*"Yeah I was always tense, not able to eat because I have no appetite for the food here, I find it difficult to so you can imagine when I'm most stressed up, what will happen? so I was not able to eat, sometimes I would sleep with one eye open and I was not focusing on certain things, I limited my calls and yeah"*

Another participant said,

*"Yeah, I felt quite overwhelmed because, for example, I had this essay it was like the 24-hour essay that made me very nervous because it had, it was like you had only 24 hours to complete this essay. There was a problem for me. I felt like I did not understand the question very well, and I so I did not know if my essay was kinda relatable".*

### **Coping Strategies**

In terms of coping strategies, almost all the participants shared similar views about the activities they generally engage in to help them cope with stress. They mentioned exercises, going on walks, going to the gym, playing video games, socializing with friends, focusing, mindfulness, using social platforms, screaming out stress, lecturer advice, university support services, relaxation and listening to music.

A participant said,

*"emmm in the past days I usually do a lot of exercises but lately I haven't been doing that, emmm doing exercise usually generates a lot of relieve for me and helps with my self-image, so it used to help a lot, emmm lately I kind of usually go on a walk, emmm stepping away the things that cause me stress".*

This view is shared by another participant, who said,

*"For me, sometimes I play video games for a few hours. For me, video games are a good way of getting rid of stress. I also socialize with my friends, so they kind of help me with emmmm just like getting rid of the focus that is putting on the things just to get my mind off them".*

A participant also gave his views about the activities he normally engages in when under stress by saying,

*"I normally use social media is Facebooking, chat friends on WhatsApp and also watch comedy series on YouTube".*

### **DISCUSSION**

The current study has identified patterns of stress and coping strategies within a defined student population. Our findings suggest that respondents have different understandings and experiences of stress and coping. Respondents understand stress as different factors such as burdens, uncomfortable situations, financial problems, intense courses, unfriendly weather, assignment deadlines, time management and completing assignments on time all these factors are weighing you down and you don't know how to deal with them and these factors make you feel overwhelmed. Respondents revealed that they go through these stressors from different activities in their academic life and respond to these stressors in different ways.

Previous studies that have looked into how university students experience stress and coping found similar findings. According to Bahari & Madlan <sup>[11]</sup>, stress among students has been associated with their workload, assignment deadlines, time management, financial problems and unfriendly environment. Along the same line, Abouserie <sup>[12]</sup> viewed stress as a manifestation of psycho-physiological reaction towards the demands of excessive workload and time management. This finding also agrees with a similar study conducted by Archer and Lammin <sup>[13]</sup> which revealed that factors including assignment deadlines, examinations, competing for a good grade, time constraints, lecturer and the environment of the lecture halls are the main contributors to academic-related stress experienced by students.

Upon asking the participants about some of the symptoms they exhibit when under stress they mentioned that sometimes you will feel frustrated, depressed, anxious and tense among others. These findings agree with a similar study conducted by Mahmoud et al., <sup>[14]</sup> which revealed that college students reported experiencing frustration, depression, and anxiety as symptoms of stress. Daugherty and Lane <sup>[15]</sup> also found that "stressors can

cause negative symptoms such as elevated levels of anxiety and depression, headaches, poor academic performance, or poor sleep pattern.

Given the various challenges faced by university students, their ability to cope effectively is crucial. Some students, unlike others, would be able to cope and manage through, depending on the individual <sup>[16]</sup>. With regards to coping strategies used when under stress, respondents deal with the situation in different ways and how they stay in a kind of healthy state. Respondents mentioned various strategies they generally engage in to help cope with stressful situations which include exercises, going on walks, going to the gym, playing video games, socializing with friends, focusing, mindfulness, using social platforms, screaming out stress, lecturer advice, university support services, relaxation and listening to music.

Regarding exercises, going on a walk, going to the gym, socializing with friends, relaxation and listening to music which this present study found as coping strategies used by the students. A similar finding was reported by Shaikh et al., <sup>[17]</sup> that, “relaxation, socializing with friends, sports and music were common coping strategies”. Seyedfatemi et al., <sup>[18]</sup> study also found out that getting professional advice, counselling and university support services were the common coping strategies used by nursing students in Iran.

### **Conclusion & Recommendation**

Most of the respondents defined stress as different factors such as burden, basically weighing you down and you don't know how to deal with them. Uncomfortable situations, financial problems, intense courses, unfriendly weather, assignment deadlines, time management and completing assignments on time were the most common causes of stress. Some of the symptoms students experience when under stress are frustration, depression, anxiety and feeling tense among others. Students were able to identify some strategies to cope with stress such as exercises, going on a walk, going to the gym, playing video games, socializing with friends, focusing, mindfulness, using social platforms, screaming out stress, lecturer advice, university support services, relaxation and listening to music.

This could establish an important foundation for a subsequent intervention study which could focus on helping students to cope better with stress. Understanding the sources of stress as perceived by students and carrying out precise stress-training courses for students will aid in decreasing stress levels.

### **DECLARATIONS**

#### **Ethics Approval and consent to participate**

Ethical approval was obtained from the School of Psychology and Therapeutic Studies Ethics Approval Panel at the University of South Wales. Informed written consent was obtained from all the participants of the study and confidentiality was assured and ensured.

#### **Competing interests**

The author declares that he has no competing interests.

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#### **Consent for publication**

Not applicable

#### **Availability of data and materials**

Upon request

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