



Impact of Workload, Social Support, and Coping Mechanisms on Stress Levels among University Students: A Sociological Perspective

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ABSTRACT

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This study investigates the impact of workload, social support, and coping mechanisms on stress levels among university students from a sociological perspective. The purpose of this research is to examine how these three factors contribute to students' stress and identify the role that social support and coping strategies play in mitigating stress caused by academic demands. Using a survey questionnaire, data were collected from a sample of university students in Pakistan. Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) was employed for data analysis to test the hypothesized relationships between the variables. The findings revealed that workload positively influences stress levels, suggesting that higher academic demands lead to increased stress. Conversely, social support and effective coping mechanisms were found to have a negative impact on stress, indicating their crucial role in reducing students' stress levels. The results underscore the importance of balancing academic workloads, promoting social support systems, and teaching coping strategies to improve students' well-being. This study provides valuable insights for educational policymakers, administrators, and mental health professionals to develop interventions aimed at reducing stress among university students. It highlights the need for institutional strategies that address workload pressures and enhance support and coping resources.

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1.0 Introduction

In current era, university students are operating in increasingly demanding academic environments that involve balancing multiple responsibilities such as coursework, social responsibilities and at times, their part time jobs. As a result of this rise in responsibilities, the level of stress in educational settings has been on the rise across the globe (Cao et al., 2024). In this case, stress can be defined as a psychological and physiological reaction to academic and outside pressure that students face on a daily basis (Fischer, 2024). The university operates as a strongly competitive scenario which pushes students to pursue success aggressively. The growing epidemic of stress is primarily caused by excessive workload and additional contributing elements play a role in its development. Social support access along with specific coping techniques serve as important factors which influence stress management for university students (Paitaridou et al., 2024).

The academic environment is characterized by workload as one of the key stressors for university students. It refers to the amount of coursework, deadlines, examinations, assignments and any other academic task that needs to be handled by a student in a specific period (Mykhaylyshyn et al., 2024). There is a high level of research that has continuously demonstrated that high levels of workload have a positive correlation with increased stress levels among students. Students who are stressed out by academic demands are more likely to experience stress which can take both psychological and physical symptoms such as anxiety, fatigue and depression (Dopelt & Houminer-Klepar, 2024). In addition, workload is not just how many academic tasks are present but also the perception of the difficulty of those tasks and how long it will take to accomplish them. Since students struggle to meet academic expectations, the stress levels increase which can in turn negatively influence academic performance, social relationships, as well as mental health (Amanvermez et al., 2024).

However, workload does not fully explain the stress of university students. Whether they have social support or not, how the students cope with academic pressure can be determined. One protective factor found to be an important protective factor against stress is social support also called the emotional, informational and practical assistance given by family, friends, and peers (Ansari et al., 2024). According to Mordi et al. (2023), students who have subjective high experiences of social support tend to report lower stress levels with demanding academic workloads. The negative impact of stressors can be buffered by social support which gives people the resources needed to effectively manage stress. For instance, students with people to turn to for emotional support feel more confident to face academic competition and, therefore, perceive less stress. Informational support, for example, advice or guidance toward a time management strategy, can aid students in developing better time management strategies and alleviated their academic burdens (Taylor & Frechette, 2022).

Other important variable is the coping mechanisms for how they cope with stress. Coping mechanisms are positive and negative cognitive and behavioral strategies individuals employ to deal stress and stress related outcomes. There are two broad types of these strategies, adaptive coping mechanisms such as problem solving, time management and seeking support, and

maladaptive coping mechanisms such as avoidance, procrastination and substance use. It has been found that students who apply adaptive coping strategies are more likely to cope with stress effectively and have less negative outcomes, e.g. anxiety or depression (Ukoba et al., 2024). On the other hand, stress is often higher and mental health suffers more among students who depend on maladaptive coping strategies. It is therefore important to understand the role that coping mechanisms play for designing interventions which can assist students in managing their stress in a healthy and proper way (Gupta et al., 2024).

The research problem of this study relates to the high level of stress experienced by university students brought about by increased academic demands, lack of social support and inefficient coping strategies. Since stress negatively impacts students' mental health, academic performance and the general wellbeing, identifying the causes of stress and the solutions for these causes becomes critical. Previous research has clearly demonstrated that workload and stress are linked, but the effects of social support and coping mechanisms in moderating or mediating such a relationship has not been fully studied. Moreover, the current literature has mainly left aside the cultural context in which these dynamics are developed, in particular in non-Western contexts. Following from these gaps, this study attempts to fill the gaps by investigating workload, social support, and coping mechanisms in relation to one another in a multi-cultural society with a goal of creating targeted interventions to lower student stress.

This study is important because it can offer more general knowledge of the things that increase student stress, particularly in various cultural environments. This study will be able to help enhance the way to create effective interventions or support systems that could assist students to cope better with their stresses by looking at the relationships between workload, social support, and coping mechanisms. For instance, universities can offer programs that stimulate social support networks, teach students adaptive coping strategies as well as improve students' abilities to manage their workload. Interventions of this sort would possibly enhance student's academic performance, mental health and general welfare resulting in better educational outcomes. Additionally, the cultural context on which this study focuses is an important contribution to the literature in playing out this aspect of people's stress reactions and coping processes.

This paper aims to find out whether workload, social support, and coping mechanisms affect the university students' stress level. An aim of the study is to fill the research gaps in student stress using the transactional model of stress and coping as a theoretical framework, in order to provide a more nuanced understanding of what it is to be a student. The study explores how social support and coping mechanisms play moderating and mediating roles in these dynamics in order to shed light on the complexity of stress and to demonstrate the need for stress to be mitigated with the aim of achieving better student outcomes. Additionally, the study was set in sociocultural context so that it can generate useful insights in regard to how these dynamics are experienced in various cultural contexts, which in the end lends itself to the development of more culturally sensitive interventions and support systems for university students.

2.0 Literature Review

Stress in academic settings is primarily based on Lazarus and Folkman (1984) transactional model of stress and coping. In this model, in other words, stress is a dynamic process that develops through the interplay between an individual and his environment. Stress does not just happen to you, it is a matter of your appraisal of situations and whether or not you perceive that you have resources to deal with that situation. Since this model enables understanding of the sources of stress that university students face, like unnecessary workloads and high expectations, as well as the resources that are available to them, such as social support and coping skills (Folkman & Lazarus, 1985), it is significant in the university context. The basis of this framework is the notion of cognitive appraisal in which individuals evaluate if a particular event is considered stressful and if one's coping resources are sufficient for dealing with the event. The model suggests that the imbalance between perceived demands and perceived capacity to meet the demands of stress cause stress, and this is applicable in an academic context in which workloads are bound to fluctuate and students vary in their coping resources.

By applying the transactional model in an academic stress environment, it became possible to gain insight as to how workload affects an individual's stress levels. According to Beiter et al. (2015) academic workload is one of the most significant stress inducing factors amongst university students. Generally, this stress occurs because of the number of assignments one has to complete, the complexity of the coursework, and the need to attain good grades (Jones & Brown, 2019). Stress levels increase when students feel that the academic tasks are too much for them or they are not capable of handling them and this interferes with the academic performance and in general the wellbeing. According to Beiter et al. (2015) students who have higher workloads also reported higher levels of stress which in turn, leads to a variety of undesirable consequences such as anxiety, depression, and burnout. The findings from this body of research elevate workload to a key factor in the stress experience among students and the need to look into how students navigate through these stressors with resources they have at hand like social support and coping strategies.

Social support is indeed known as a powerful buffer against stress in high pressure environments, such as the one in which universities operate. Social support includes the emotional, informational, and instrumental aid family, friends, and peers can give (Barrera, 2021). There is also research in the academic context that finds students with social support networks they perceive as powerful tend to perceive less stress among demanding workloads (Hefner & Eisenberg, 2009). One of the ways that social support buffers against these effects is through supplying individuals with the means to reappraise a stressor as more manageable, or, in practical ways, assisting them with dealing with the stressor itself (Cohen & Wills, 1985). It has recently been shown that social support can lessen the deleterious effects of academic workload on stress. However, in comparison, Brougham et al. (2009) isolated that student who demonstrated higher levels of social support experienced a lesser likelihood of experiencing stress related health issues and despite facing great academic challenges. In the same vein, Cohen et al. (2014) state that rather, social support facilitates students' emotional and practical assertion to the complex requirements of university life. This indicates that social support doesn't just relieve the emotional stress of stress,

but also offers material resources that student can utilize to control their academic workload better. Other than social support, coping mechanisms prove crucial in how the students manage stress. Coping mechanisms are cognitive and behavioral approaches of individuals to cope with stressful situations (Carver et al., 1989). The effectiveness of such strategies in reducing stress and promoting wellbeing will determine whether they are adaptive or maladaptive. University students have adopted adaptive coping strategies which include problem solving, time management and seeking social support, in order to reduce stress and improve their mental health outcomes (Cheng & Cheung, 2005). On the other hand, avoidance, procrastination, and substance use, which are maladaptive, tend to make stress worse and to lead to poorer outcomes (Park & Adler, 2003). For example, Dyson and Rank (2006) noted an example of students that employed problem focused coping strategies, such as planning and active coping, will be more able to manage their stress and experience lower levels of anxiety. However, students who tried to use avoidance strategies like overlooking academic tasks or relying on substances to deal with stress were more stressed and achieved less academically. Thus, these findings underscore the value of enhancing adaptive coping mechanisms for university students that will allow them to cope with stress from academic workloads.

The dependence between workload and social support as well as coping mechanisms is interdependent and complex. Workload is the primary driver of stress while social support and coping mechanism play a role of moderating and mediating variable on how students experience and cope with stress. It is appraised that the coping mechanisms depend on the availability of social support (Lazarus and Folk man, 1984), and this is due to individuals with strong social networks are more likely to adopt adaptive coping strategies. Take for example, emotionally and practically supported students are more likely to be confident of their ability to manage their academic workload and thus employ effective coping strategies such as problem solving and time management (Cohen et al., 2014). Opposite to the first one, students that are lacking social support might be overwhelmed by the workload and resort to maladaptive coping strategies, for example avoidance or procrastination (Dyson & Rank, 2006). Thus, the interaction between social support and coping mechanisms indicates the need for their combined study along with workload in order to analyze sources and consequences of stress in university students.

Also, recent empirical studies have been conducted on the influence of workload, social support, as well as coping mechanism on levels of stress among university students. For instance, Misra and McKean (2000) discovered through a study that students with greater workload were much more likely to experience stress, although the association was moderated by the presence of a social support. Those who had strong social networks were able to handle their workload better and the levels of stress were low compared to the individuals who lacked social support. Researchers Aspin wall & Taylor (1997) discovered that students with adaptive coping strategies (seeking help and solving problems) were less likely to exhibit stress related health complaints than those without such alternative methods of managing stress with the proviso that they had to deal with exorbitant academic demands. Consistent with the transactional model of stress and coping (Lazarus & Folk man, 1984), stress is not extremely dictated by external demand but by

how people perceive and manage these demands depending on the resources available to them. In addition, the cultural context influences how students experience, and have to cope with, stress. It is evident from studies that the ability to use the social support and coping mechanisms may equally differ between various cultures. For example, Kim et al. (2008) discovered that social support has a buffer role on stress more strongly in collectivist cultures such as a strong orientation to social networks and communal values. On the contrary, in individualistic cultures like self-reliance and independence are highly valued, students are more likely to make use of individual coping strategy and not look for social support (Singh & Sharma, 2017). This implies that cultural aspects should be taken in to consideration while investigating the relation between workload, social support and coping mechanisms in different sociocultural contexts.

There has been growing research on student stress, but the literature is not closing in several areas. Second, although there are many studies conducted on the direct link between workload and stress, there are scant attention given to the moderating role of social support and the mediating role of coping mechanisms (Cooper et al., 2018). Furthermore, only a few studies have been conducted that investigate how various coping strategies, combined with social support, play a role in determining the overall stress outcomes (Jones & Brown, 2019). Additionally, most of the studies on student stress in the literature have been conducted in Western contexts where little attention has been given on how cultural elements may shape these dynamics within non Western contexts (Singh & Sharma, 2017). For instance, social support, an important factor in collectivist cultures, may buffer the influence of social networks on stress more in these cultures rather than individualistic cultures (Kim et al., 2008). In an attempt to help address the above identified gaps this study attempts to examine the relationships between workload, social support and coping mechanisms among students from a university in a culturally diverse context.

3.0 Methodology

The design adopted to conduct the research was a quantitative research design, which was ideal in establishing the relationships between the workload, social support, coping mechanisms and levels of stress among university students. The design made it possible to collect numerical data which could be subsequently statistically analyzed to test the study's hypotheses. The positivist philosophy was adopted by the study because it aimed to objectively observe and analyze empirical data and the relationships between variables. The study attempted this by adopting a similar approach to uncover generalizable patterns and relationships that would help further the knowledge of student stress in academic settings.

For the study, the population was the university students of Pakistan because the academic environment in this country has been facing forces of increasing demands and intensifying stressors on students because the education standards evolved and students feel competitive pressure. Since the academic culture in Pakistan is different from the Western world, researchers limited focus to university students in Pakistan, as it was presumed that social support and coping mechanisms may vary because of cultural factors such as collectivism. Since there is such a large number of universities and considerable amount of diversity in the student population in Pakistan, the research sought to obtain a representative sample of students for the research to generalize the

outcomes to this segment of population.

The sampling was done using stratified random sampling strategy to select students from different disciplines, years of study and also both public and private institutions. This was done to reflect the diversity of the student population in terms of experience with the academic and the social context. The sample size determination was achieved using Cochran’s Formula for sample size calculation; to ensure that the study had sufficient statistical power to detect meaningful relations between variables. Initially 500 students were approached and from the 450 (after excluding incomplete or unusable responses) these formed the final sample for the study.

Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) was adopted as it handles complex models with multiple constructs and is also robust in handling smaller sample sizes, thus this was the model used to analyses the collected data. Given it is the simultaneous analysis of these relationships between workload, social support, coping mechanisms and stress levels and the possible moderating and mediating effects on these relationships, PLS-SEM was deemed appropriate for this study. The fit of the model was examined using standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) and the chi-square/df form of indicators to ensure the model adequately fit the data. Furthermore, in order to evaluate the reliability and validity of the constructs, Cornbrash’s alpha, composite reliability, and average variance extracted (Ansari, #7) were determined. Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT) was used to evaluate the discriminant validity of the constructs.

4.0 Findings and Results

4.1 Measurement Model

4.1 Reliability Analysis

Construct	Cornbrash’s Alpha	Composite Reliability (Ukoba, #10)
Workload	0.85	0.89
Social Support	0.83	0.88
Coping Mechanisms	0.81	0.86
Stress Levels	0.87	0.91

Internal consistency reliability is assessed through Cronbach’s Alpha and Composite Reliability (Ukoba, #10). All the Cronbach's Alpha for constructs range between 0.81 and 0.87, which reveals good level of internal consistency because values about 0.7 are typically acceptable. Also, the values of Composite Reliability of all constructs exceed recommended threshold of 0.7

which confirms the measurement model reliability.

4.2 Validity Analysis (HTMT - Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio)

Table 4.2 Validity Analysis (HTMT - Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio)

Constructs	Workload	Social Support	Coping Mechanisms	Stress Levels
Workload				
Social Support	0.65			
Coping Mechanisms	0.72	0.68		
Stress Levels	0.78	0.71	0.76	

The values for the HTMT show discriminant validity among the constructs. None of the HTMT ratios are above 0.85, indicating that the constructs are different from one another. So, this confirms that the model has good discriminant validity.

4.3 Variance Inflation Factor

Table 4.3 Variance Inflation Factor (VIF)

Construct	VIF Value
Workload	2.10
Social Support	1.98
Coping Mechanisms	1.85
Stress Levels	2.12

Multicollinearity is detected using the VIF values. All values are less than the suggested threshold of 5, so there isn't any issue of Multicollinearity in this model, and the predictors are not closely correlated with each other.

4.4 Model fitness

4.4 Model Fitness Table

Fit Index	Value	Threshold
SRMR (Standardized Root Mean Square Residual)	0.05	< 0.08
Chi-Square/df Ratio	2.30	< 3.00
CFI (Comparative Fit Index)	0.93	> 0.90
TLI (Tucker-Lewis Index)	0.91	> 0.90

The values of the fit indices model show that they fit well the data. A good fit is indicated by SRMR value to be below threshold of 0.08. Also, the ratio of Chi-Square/df is less than 3.0 and the CFI and TLI values are above 0.9 which signifies that the structural model fits the observed data adequately.

4.4 Structural Equation Model

4.4. Structural Equation Model Results (Path Coefficients)

Path	Path Coefficient (β)	t-value	p-value	Significance
Workload -> Stress Levels	0.45	4.32	<0.001	Significant
Social Support -> Stress Levels	-0.35	3.67	<0.001	Significant
Coping Mechanisms -> Stress Levels	-0.28	3.21	0.002	Significant

The path coefficients show the direct effects of workload, the social support and coping mechanisms to stress levels. Stress levels have a significant positive effect with workload ($\beta = 0.45$, $p < 0.001$), so that when workload is increased, stress levels increase too. On the other hand, social support ($\beta = -0.35$, $p < 0.001$) and coping mechanisms ($\beta = -0.28$, $p = 0.002$) have negative significant effects with stress level, meaning that higher level of social support and coping mechanism leads to lower level of stress. The p-values of all the relationships in the model are less than 0.05, thereby meaning that they are statistically significant.

5.0 Discussion and Conclusion

From the study results, it is keenly understood how workload, social support and coping mechanisms affect stress levels among university students. According to the results workload was found to have positive relationship with stress level, meaning that as the amount of academics and extracurricular workload increases, students experience high levels of stress. This result is consistent with other studies which have found workload to be a significant stressor in educational environments, particularly in university level, where students have to face a large amount of academic and social challenges at the same time (Casanova et al., 2014). Stress, therefore, works in a positive direction with workload, and this emphasizes the need for strategies that manage workload better than currently, because high pressure destroys the mental health, productivity and general wellbeing of students.

Conversely, social support had a significant negative relationship with stress levels. The stronger support from peers, families and faculty, the fewer students felt the stress. This is consistent with the well-recognized role of social support as a buffer against psychological distress (Cohen & Wills, 1985). A strong social support system can assist students in dealing with academic challenges, buffer feelings of isolation, and give emotional comfort which on the other hand reduces the stress burden. This should be taken note of by universities and educational institutions and needed to develop supportive communities within and outside the academic environment.

Furthermore, negative correlation was also observed between coping mechanisms and stress levels, which mean that those students who had good coping mechanisms were able to reduce the level of stress among students. Adaptive strategies, among them problem solving, emotional regulation (to include capping the emotional elevator)s, and seeking social support are essential coping mechanisms for dealing with stress, especially when it becomes chronic (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The results indicate that students who are actively involved in stress management techniques are more likely to cope with scholarly pressure and preserve a balanced position between the minds. From this comes the extent to which it is very important to teach and promote effective coping skills.

Saima Malik Aulakh: Problem Identification and Theoretical Framework

Arslan Asghar: Data Analysis, Supervision and Drafting

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Conflict of Interests/Disclosures

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