
Stress Perception and Coping Styles Among University Students

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Abstract: University students frequently encounter academic, interpersonal, financial, and career-related demands that may influence their psychological well-being and academic functioning. The present study examined perceived stress and coping styles among university students, with particular emphasis on problem-focused, emotion-focused, and avoidant coping strategies. A quantitative, descriptive, correlational, and cross-sectional research design was adopted. Data were obtained from 320 undergraduate and postgraduate students enrolled in different academic disciplines. Standardized self-report measures were used to assess perceived stress and coping responses.

Descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation analysis, and multiple regression analysis were employed to examine patterns and relationships among the study variables. The findings indicated a moderate-to-high level of perceived stress among participants. Problem-focused coping emerged as the most frequently used adaptive coping style and demonstrated a significant negative association with perceived stress. Emotion-focused coping showed a modest positive relationship with stress, whereas avoidant coping demonstrated the strongest positive association with higher stress perception.

Regression findings further indicated that coping styles significantly predicted perceived stress. The study highlights the importance of strengthening adaptive coping resources, psychological flexibility, problem-solving abilities, and accessible student-support systems within universities. The findings may assist higher education institutions in developing evidence-informed interventions designed to promote resilience, effective stress management, and psychological well-being among university students.

Keywords: Perceived Stress, Coping Styles, University Students, Problem-Focused Coping, Emotion-Focused Coping, Avoidant Coping, Psychological Well-Being, Higher Education.

Introduction

University education represents an important developmental period characterized by intellectual growth, increasing independence, social transition, and preparation for professional life. At the same time, students are frequently exposed to multiple demands involving academic performance, examinations, assignment deadlines, financial responsibilities, interpersonal relationships, family expectations, and uncertainty regarding future employment. When individuals perceive these demands as exceeding their available psychological and practical resources, stress may emerge as a significant concern affecting emotional well-being and everyday functioning.

Stress is not determined exclusively by the objective presence of challenging circumstances; rather, it is influenced by how individuals interpret and evaluate those circumstances. According to the transactional perspective of stress, psychological stress develops through an interaction between environmental demands and an individual's appraisal of available coping resources. Consequently, students exposed to similar academic conditions may experience substantially different levels of stress depending on their cognitive appraisal, personal resources, social support, resilience, and coping strategies.

Coping refers to the cognitive and behavioral efforts individuals employ to manage demands that are perceived as stressful or difficult. Coping strategies are commonly categorized into problem-focused, emotion-focused, and avoidant approaches. Problem-focused coping involves directly addressing the source of stress through planning, problem-solving, information seeking, and active behavioral responses. Emotion-focused coping seeks to regulate emotional reactions through acceptance, emotional expression, reframing, or support seeking. Avoidant coping involves disengagement, denial, behavioral withdrawal, procrastination, or attempts to escape stressful circumstances without directly resolving them. The effectiveness of a coping strategy depends considerably on the nature and controllability of the stressful situation. Problem-focused strategies are generally considered beneficial when individuals can actively modify the source of stress, whereas emotion-regulation strategies may be particularly useful when circumstances cannot be immediately changed. Persistent reliance on avoidance, however, may leave stressors unresolved and contribute to prolonged psychological distress. Understanding how university students use different coping styles is therefore important for identifying psychological processes associated with healthier adaptation.

Objectives of the Study

The primary objective of the study was to examine perceived stress and coping styles among university students and determine how different coping approaches are associated with variations in stress perception. The study specifically considered problem-focused, emotion-focused, and avoidant coping as important behavioral and psychological responses to university-related stressors.

Assessment of Perceived Stress

The study aimed to assess the overall level of perceived stress experienced by university students in relation to academic responsibilities, interpersonal challenges, financial pressures, future uncertainty, and everyday university demands. It sought to determine whether students generally experienced low, moderate, or elevated stress and to establish a descriptive profile of stress perception within the selected university sample.

Identification of Coping Styles

A further objective was to identify the coping strategies most frequently adopted by students when responding to stressful circumstances. Particular attention was given to problem-focused coping, emotion-focused coping, and avoidant coping. The study examined the relative use of these approaches to understand whether students predominantly relied on active adaptive responses or disengagement-oriented strategies when managing stress.

Relationship Between Stress and Coping

The study also aimed to examine the relationships between perceived stress and different coping styles. It investigated whether problem-focused coping was associated with reduced stress perception and whether emotion-focused and avoidant coping were related to elevated stress. The predictive contribution of each coping style was additionally examined to identify coping patterns most strongly associated with students' perceived stress.

Review of Literature

Perceived Stress Among University Students

University students represent a population that may experience substantial psychological pressure because of simultaneous academic and developmental demands. Academic workload, competitive evaluation, examinations, social adjustment, financial concerns, changing relationships, and uncertainty about employment can contribute to students' perception of stress. The transition into higher education may be particularly demanding

because students are expected to develop greater autonomy while adapting to unfamiliar academic and social environments.

Cohen, Kamarck, and Mermelstein (1983) conceptualized perceived stress as the extent to which individuals evaluate situations in their lives as unpredictable, uncontrollable, and overwhelming. This conceptualization emphasizes subjective appraisal rather than merely counting stressful events. Two students may therefore encounter similar academic demands but experience different psychological outcomes because of differences in appraisal, coping resources, personality characteristics, and perceived control.

Coping Styles and Psychological Adaptation

The transactional model developed by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) provides an influential theoretical framework for understanding stress and coping. According to this perspective, coping consists of continuously changing cognitive and behavioral efforts used to manage demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding personal resources. Coping is therefore a dynamic process shaped by both individual characteristics and situational conditions.

Problem-focused coping involves active attempts to modify or resolve the source of stress. Strategies may include planning, prioritization, seeking practical information, time management, and direct problem-solving. Such strategies may enhance perceived control and reduce stress when the stressor is manageable. Carver, Scheier, and Weintraub (1989) further demonstrated that coping consists of multiple behavioral and cognitive dimensions rather than a single response pattern.

Avoidant Coping and Student Well-Being

Avoidant coping generally involves attempts to disengage from a stressful situation through denial, behavioral withdrawal, distraction, procrastination, or other forms of psychological escape. Although temporary disengagement may occasionally provide short-term emotional relief, habitual avoidance may prevent individuals from resolving the underlying problem.

Research suggests that maladaptive coping responses may be associated with greater psychological distress. Compas et al. (2017) emphasized that coping and emotion-regulation processes play an important role in adjustment to stress. In university contexts, persistent avoidance may contribute to delayed academic responsibilities, reduced perceived control, and the accumulation of unresolved stressors.

Research Methodology

Research Design

The study adopted a quantitative, descriptive, correlational, and cross-sectional research design. This design was considered appropriate because it enabled the assessment of perceived stress and coping styles at a specific point in time without manipulating the study variables. The correlational component facilitated examination of the direction and strength of relationships between stress perception and coping strategies.

The principal variables included perceived stress, problem-focused coping, emotion-focused coping, and avoidant coping. Descriptive analysis was used to summarize participants' responses, while inferential statistical procedures were applied to examine associations and predictive relationships among the variables.

Participants and Sampling

The study sample consisted of 320 university students enrolled in undergraduate and postgraduate programs across different academic disciplines. Participants represented diverse educational backgrounds to provide broader coverage of university-level experiences.

Students were selected using an appropriate sampling procedure based on accessibility and eligibility for participation. Inclusion criteria required participants to be currently enrolled in a recognized university program and willing to participate voluntarily. Participation was anonymous, and confidentiality of individual responses was maintained throughout the research process.

Research Instruments and Data Collection

Perceived stress was assessed using a structured measure based on established principles of the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS) developed by Cohen et al. (1983). Items assessed the extent to which students perceived recent life circumstances as unpredictable, difficult to control, or psychologically overwhelming.

Coping styles were assessed through items representing three broad dimensions: problem-focused coping, emotion-focused coping, and avoidant coping. Responses were recorded using a five-point Likert-type scale, with higher scores indicating greater use of the respective coping strategy.

Results

Descriptive Analysis of Stress and Coping Styles

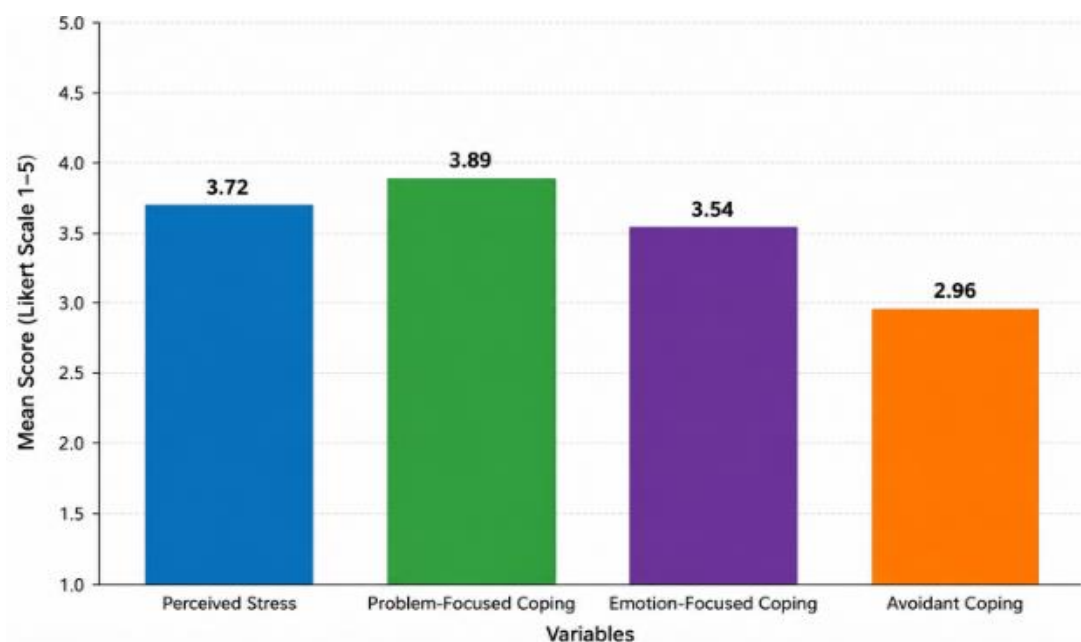
The descriptive results indicated that university students experienced a moderate-to-high level of perceived stress, with a mean score of 3.72 on a five-point scale. Among coping styles, problem-focused coping recorded the highest mean score ($M = 3.89$), followed by emotion-focused coping ($M = 3.54$). Avoidant coping demonstrated a comparatively lower mean score ($M = 2.96$).

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Perceived Stress and Coping Styles

Variable	Mean	SD	Interpretation
Perceived Stress	3.72	0.68	Moderate–High
Problem-Focused Coping	3.89	0.61	High
Emotion-Focused Coping	3.54	0.66	Moderate–High
Avoidant Coping	2.96	0.73	Moderate

The findings suggest that although participants experienced meaningful levels of stress, they also reported relatively frequent use of active problem-focused coping. Emotion-focused strategies were moderately prevalent, while avoidance was used less frequently than the other coping approaches.

Figure 1. Mean Scores of Perceived Stress and Coping Styles



The graphical distribution demonstrates that problem-focused coping obtained the highest mean score, whereas avoidant coping had the lowest. Perceived stress nevertheless remained relatively elevated, suggesting that students may continue to experience substantial psychological demands despite using adaptive coping strategies.

Correlation Between Perceived Stress and Coping Styles

Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to examine relationships between perceived stress and the three coping dimensions.

Table 2. Correlations Between Coping Styles and Perceived Stress

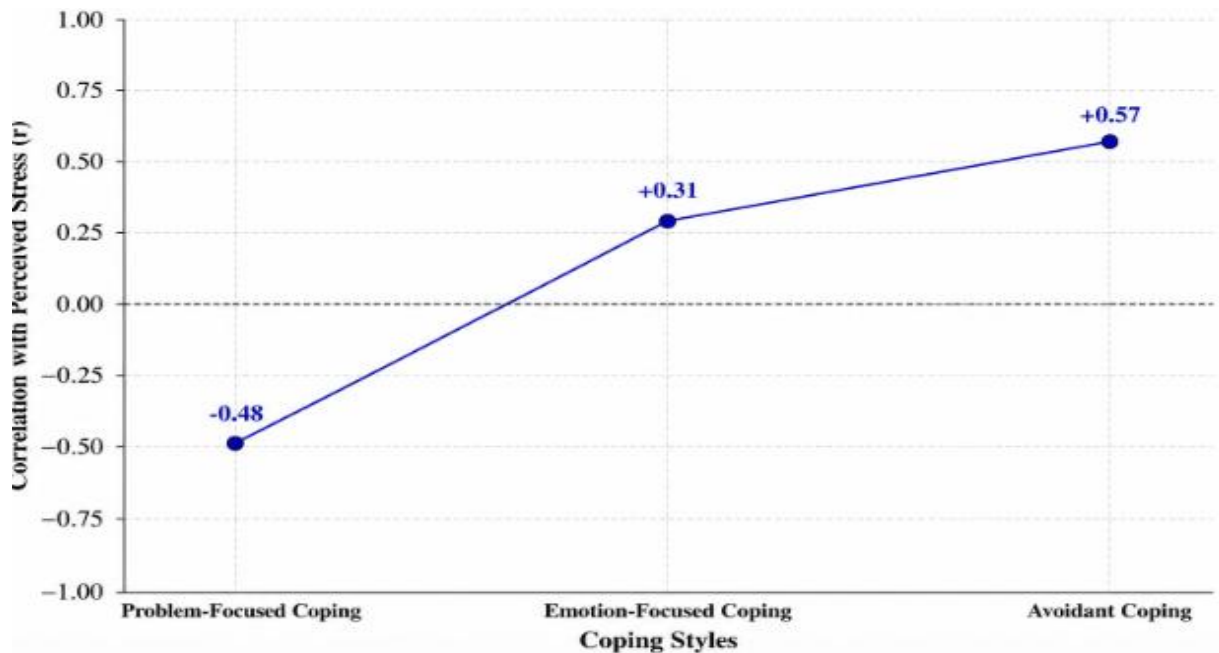
Coping Style	Correlation with Perceived Stress (r)	Direction	Significance
Problem-Focused Coping	-0.48	Negative	$p < .001$
Emotion-Focused Coping	+0.31	Positive	$p < .001$
Avoidant Coping	+0.57	Positive	$p < .001$

Problem-focused coping demonstrated a statistically significant negative correlation with perceived stress ($r = -0.48$, $p < .001$). This result indicates that greater use of active problem-solving and constructive coping was associated with lower perceived stress.

Emotion-focused coping showed a modest positive correlation with stress ($r = +0.31$, $p < .001$). This relationship should be interpreted carefully because emotion-focused coping includes diverse responses, some of which may be adaptive while others may reflect reactions to already elevated levels of stress.

Avoidant coping demonstrated the strongest positive relationship with perceived stress ($r = +0.57$, $p < .001$), indicating that students who relied more heavily on disengagement and avoidance tended to report higher levels of perceived stress.

Figure 2. Correlation of Coping Styles with Perceived Stress



correlation pattern clearly differentiates adaptive and potentially maladaptive coping responses. Problem-focused coping was inversely related to stress, whereas avoidant coping displayed the strongest positive association.

Predictive Influence of Coping Styles

Multiple regression analysis was used to determine whether coping styles significantly predicted perceived stress. The overall model was statistically significant and explained approximately 39% of the variance in perceived stress ($R^2 = .39$).

Avoidant coping emerged as the strongest positive predictor ($\beta = .44$, $p < .001$), suggesting that greater reliance on avoidance was associated with increased perceived stress. Problem-focused coping was a significant negative predictor ($\beta = -.35$, $p < .001$), indicating a potentially protective association. Emotion-focused coping demonstrated a smaller positive predictive contribution ($\beta = .18$, $p < .01$).

Discussion

Stress as a Significant University Experience

The findings indicate that university students experience meaningful levels of perceived stress. This result is consistent with previous research demonstrating that higher education environments expose students to multiple simultaneous demands involving academic achievement, examinations, financial concerns, social adjustment, and career uncertainty.

The moderate-to-high perceived stress score suggests that stress should not be regarded solely as an occasional response to examinations. Rather, it may represent an ongoing psychological experience influenced by cumulative academic and personal pressures. Universities should therefore consider stress management an important component of student-support and well-being strategies.

Adaptive Role of Problem-Focused Coping

- **Most frequently used coping style** among university students.
- **Negatively associated with perceived stress**, indicating lower stress with greater use of problem-focused coping.
- Enhances **perceived control** over stressful situations.
- Encourages **active and constructive problem-solving**.
- Key strategies include **planning, time management, information seeking, and academic problem-solving**.
- **Practical support seeking** helps students manage challenges effectively.
- Helps reduce **uncertainty and prolonged psychological strain**.
- Universities should provide **problem-solving and time-management training**.
- **Academic planning and resilience-building programs** can strengthen students' adaptive coping abilities.

Risks Associated with Avoidant Coping

Avoidant coping demonstrated the strongest positive association with perceived stress and emerged as the most influential positive predictor in the regression model. This finding suggests that persistent disengagement from stressful demands may be particularly problematic for university students.

Avoidance may provide temporary relief from uncomfortable emotions; however, unresolved academic or personal problems can accumulate over time. Procrastination, denial, withdrawal, and behavioral disengagement may consequently increase perceived demands while reducing students' sense of control.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declare that there are no financial, professional, institutional, or personal conflicts of interest that could have influenced the design, conduct, interpretation, or reporting of the present study.

Conclusion

The present study examined perceived stress and coping styles among university students and identified important relationships between psychological stress and different coping responses. The findings demonstrated that students experienced moderate-to-high perceived stress while using a combination of problem-focused, emotion-focused, and avoidant coping strategies. Problem-focused coping emerged as the most frequently used coping approach and was significantly associated with lower stress perception, suggesting that active problem-solving, planning, and constructive engagement may function as important adaptive resources.

In contrast, avoidant coping demonstrated the strongest positive association with perceived stress and emerged as a significant predictor of elevated stress. These findings emphasize that the way students respond to challenging circumstances may be as important as the presence of the stressors themselves. Emotion-focused coping showed a comparatively modest positive relationship, highlighting the need to distinguish between constructive emotional regulation and coping responses that do not address persistent stressors.

Universities should develop comprehensive student-support systems that strengthen adaptive coping capacities through stress-management education, counseling services, peer-support programs, resilience training, time-management interventions, and early identification of students experiencing elevated psychological distress. Future research should employ longitudinal and multi-institutional designs to examine changes in stress and coping over time and investigate additional factors such as resilience, social support, self-efficacy, emotional regulation, academic engagement, and digital behavior.

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