

Effect of Religiosity and other Coping Strategies on Academic Stress; A Comparative Study

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ABSTRACT

This study compares the effectiveness of religious activities and other academic stress coping strategy on academic stress of exhibited by the undergraduate students of Bamidele Olumilua University of Education, Science and Technology Ikere Ekiti (BOUESTI). The study aimed at revealing the most embraced and most effective academic coping strategies in other to guide the students right. The study in this wise employed the descriptive research of the survey design, with 12,740 students of the 2023/2024 Academic Session of the university and 450 students used as the population and sample size for the study. The study employed a self-constructed questionnaire titled Religion, Spirituality and Stress Coping Strategies Questionnaire (RSSCSQ) as the instrument for the study. The instrument was validated by ensuring the face, content and criterion validity, with reliability inclusive. A 0.72 and 0.83 correlations coefficient was obtained for both the construct validity (Convergent) and reliability (Test-Retest) respectively. The study made use of descriptive statistics that includes frequency count and percentage alongside with t-test and Pearson Product Moment Correlation, all at 0.05 level of significance. The findings from the study have it that religious activities are more effective academic stress coping mechanism compared to other mechanism. While a negative and strong relationship was established between religious activities and academic stress (-0.82), indicating that an increase in religious activities will result in a reduction in academic stress. The study recommended that all forms of spiritual and religious beliefs should be respected and allowed to flourish, while ensuring proper monitoring and supervision to maintain a harmonious campus environment. Other stress coping strategies should be evaluated and modified, where necessary, to enhance their effectiveness in supporting students' mental health and academic success.

Keywords: Religious Activities, Academic Stress, Coping Strategies

INTRODUCTION

Human being cannot but be involved in various daily activities in attempt to survive. Every individual both old and young, male or female has responsibilities to fulfil and so must engage different categories of activities or works in order to achieve desired goals. There are different levels of work, obligations or activities that human being indulge in, which includes farming, schooling, singing, marketing, production etc. Some of these activities or obligations involves physical and mental engagement, while some are limited to physical. Schooling is one of such that engages both physical and mental ability, which can sometimes brought about stress.

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines stress as a condition of mental tension or anxiety induced by a challenging situation. It stated that stress is an inherent human response that motivates us to confront obstacles and hazards (WHO, 2023). Stress is a complex process that occurs when an individual perceives an event as essential to their well-being, potentially harmful or causing loss, and necessitating psychological, physiological, and behavioural attempts to cope with the event and its consequences. Similarly, Crosswell & Lockwood (2020) affirmed that stress is a general term that denotes situations in which the environmental demands of a situation exceed the individual's perceived psychological and physiological capacity to manage them effectively. Although stress is an essential component of daily life, the physical and mental health of

humans can be significantly impacted by overwhelming adverse experiences, such as cardiovascular, digestive, and metabolic diseases, as well as anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, schizophrenia, and substance use relapsed (Kim & Kim, 2023).

Stress can be classified according to its causes into acute, chronic, emotional, physical, psycho-social, psychological, burnout, psycho-spiritual and eustress stress (Kapur, 2021). Holahan et al (2017) further stated that stress is caused by a variety of factors termed stressors. Similarly, Pascoe et al (2020) affirmed that stressors are stimuli or events that trigger stress in people, stating that they can be external, such as environmental challenges, or internal, such as personal perceptions and thoughts. Pang et al (2021) and Pirotta et al (2022) corroborated that the environment significantly determines the types and intensity of stressors encountered. For instance, stressors in the workplace include job demands, deadlines, and interpersonal conflicts. These factors can lead to occupational or job stress impacting workers' productivity and mental health (Jamil et al., 2023; Lukan et al., 2022).

Academic stress therefore has to do with mental and physical weigh down in respect of academic demand. Students are involved in daily academic activities that includes receiving lectures, attending to assignments, preparing for tests and examination, engagement in personal and group reading coupled with daily house chores. All of these activities runs through all the days in the week and often leads to mental and physical stress, which could break some students down if not properly managed.

Students engages in different activities or embrace different mechanism in attempt to manage or cope with academic stress. Some of this mechanism or measures includes physical exercise, socializing, leveraging on social media platform (chatting), watching films and listening to music, seeking counselling and engagement in religious activities. Religious activities such as singing and dancing, listening to religious/spiritual messages, attending religious program, reading sacred books and praying had been considered one of the effective stress coping strategies that people can consider. Nigeria is one of the most religious country in Africa and this had made the citizens highly religious to the level that they commit what so ever they are going through their God and leverage on spiritual activities and engagement.

However, studies have revealed that other coping mechanisms outside religious related ones have significant limitations. Social support networks may occasionally be insufficient due to the stigma associated with requesting help, resulting in underutilization of existing services (Gallimore et al., 2023). Physical activities, while helpful, may not be available to all students owing to time restrictions or a lack of resources (Silva et al., 2022). Academic-related activities also frequently fail when students experience excessive workloads or lack adequate time management skills (Ahmady et al., 2021). Meanwhile spiritual activities are seen to be beneficiary in all sense, owing to the fact that it is divine. The religious faithful are of the opinion that spiritual engagement will not only refresh and reduces stress but also brought about mental, psychological and physical healings. While some students leverage on other coping strategies, some as well prefer the religious coping strategy in managing academic stress, the cruise of the matter however, is which coping strategy will better influence academic stress.

Statement of the Problem

In attempt to meet up with numerous and daily academic demands, students do got broke down mentally and psychologically, which is at variance with the major reason while they are studying. Mental and psychological disorder if not properly managed can lead to a worse situation and render a promising youth useless for the rest of his/her life. Barbayannis et al. (2022), found that students who experience academic stress are liable to attempt suicide if not properly managed, while Asif et al, (2020) also found out that 84% of students battling with academic stress are liable to suffer depression.

Academic stress is common among the university students who has a lot of daily academic obligations to meet in order to come out with flying colors. Though some of them has a way of mitigating this through physical exercises, socializing, watching movies, listening to music, leveraging on social media and engaging in spiritual activities, but some of them only engaged in this activities owing to peers influence without knowing which could influence the so called academic stress negatively or positively. While some considered some

coping mechanism, such as physical exercise, watching movies, chatting as another activities that could aggravate stress, some also believe that attending various spiritual activities will also contribute to stress, even though many believe that spiritual activities is divine and has no element of stress like other coping strategies. Therefore this becomes necessary to identify and compare religious activities as an academic stress coping strategy with other strategies, to establish the category of coping strategy that is most effective in managing academic stress, such that the students can be guided.

Purpose of the Study

This broadly will investigate and compare religious activities as an academic stress coping mechanism with other group of coping mechanism to establish their effect on academic stress. The study will specifically identify other academic stress coping strategy, compare the effectiveness of this group of coping strategy with religious activities and establish the relationship between the prevalence of religious activities with academic stress.

Research Question

- What are the academic coping strategy embraced by undergraduate students, in order of preference?

Research Hypotheses

- Religious activities and other academic stress coping strategy will not significantly differ in their influence on academic stress
- There exist no significant relationship between religious activities and academic stress

LITERATURE REVIEW

Common Sources of Stress among Undergraduates

Undergraduate students face numerous stressors that significantly impact their health and academic performance. Academic pressure is a primary source of stress, as students strive to maintain high grades, meet tight deadlines, and manage heavy workloads. This pressure often leads to heightened levels of stress and anxiety as students try to meet the expectations of themselves and their professors (Adegboyega, 2020). Financial stress is another major concern, particularly for students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. The burden of tuition fees, student debt, and general living expenses can distract students from their studies and cause long-term anxiety about financial security (Bright, 2023).

Coupled with this is the challenge of time management. Balancing academic demands with part-time jobs, extracurricular activities, and personal life often results in stress and burnout. Despite the importance of efficient time management, many students struggle to allocate their time effectively. Interpersonal relationships, including friendships, romantic relationships, and roommate interactions, can also be a significant source of stress. Conflicts in these relationships can exacerbate the already stressful academic environment (Chengming and Abidin, 2023).

Family expectations add another layer of pressure, as students strive to meet their families' expectations for their academic and career achievements. This can lead to feelings of inadequacy and a fear of disappointing loved ones (Chock and Chin, 2024). Professional uncertainty about job prospects after graduation is a common stressor among undergraduates. The pressure to align their current studies with future job market demands can create significant anxiety. Health issues, both physical and mental, such as depression and anxiety, further contribute to stress, negatively affecting students' quality of life and academic performance (Bright, 2023).

The transition to college life, particularly for first-year students, can be stressful as they adapt to new social networks, living away from home, and meeting academic expectations (Adegboyega et al., 2020). A lack of support from peers, family, or faculty exacerbates this stress, highlighting the need for strong support networks

(Bright, 2023). Over-commitment to extracurricular activities can also lead to burnout, despite their benefits for personal and career development. Living conditions play a crucial role in students' stress levels.

Inadequate living arrangements, such as noisy dorms and lack of privacy, can hinder students' ability to study and relax, further increasing stress (Adegboyega, 2020). Addressing these stressors requires a comprehensive strategy that includes institutional support, mental health services, and individual time management skills. Universities can foster a healthier, more supportive environment by recognizing and addressing these specific pressures, ultimately enhancing students' academic performance and overall well-being (Bright, 2023).

Consequences of stress

Prolonged stress frequently causes anxiety and depression to worsen. Persistent worry, fear, and despair might affect students' ability to function academically and in their daily lives. Memory, focus, and decision-making are just a few of the cognitive processes that stress can affect. Students' focus, memory, and performance on tests and assignments are all impacted by this. Mood swings, anger, and annoyance can result from emotional instability brought on by high stress levels. Relationships with family, friends, and instructors may suffer as a result of this emotional instability. Stress frequently throws off sleep cycles, which can result in insomnia or restless nights.

Sleep deprivation worsens stress and impairs emotional and cognitive functioning (Babar *et al.*, 2020). Students who experience ongoing stress may find it harder to stay motivated to participate in extracurricular and academic activities. Academic performance may suffer as a result, and social and leisure activities may be less frequented. Stress can damage one's confidence and sense of self. Pupils who feel overburdened by their personal and academic obligations may experience feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt (Babar *et al.*, 2020).

Prolonged stress raises blood pressure and heart rate, which can contribute to long-term cardiovascular issues. Students who are under a lot of stress all the time may get hypertension and palpitations. Similarly, stress weakens the immune system, increasing the risk of infections and illnesses among students. This may result in repeated absences and additional stress from failing to complete assignments on time (Browning *et al.*, 2021). Conditions including indigestion, IBS, and stomachaches can be brought on by or made worse by stress. The everyday routines and academic pursuits of students may be especially disrupted by these circumstance. Likewise, Tension and pain in the muscles, especially in the back, shoulders, and neck, are frequently brought on by stress.

Chronic pain issues may arise from this, impairing pupils' physical comfort and cognitive function. Stress can cause eating habits to shift, which can result in either weight gain or reduction. While some students may lose their appetite, others may use overeating as a coping strategy. Also, extended stress disrupts the endocrine system, which results in an imbalance in hormones. This may have an effect on growth, metabolism, and reproductive health, among other body functions and it can lead to hyperventilation and aggravate respiratory diseases like asthma. This can be especially upsetting in high-stress academic settings, such as test scenarios (Kuhnell *et al.*, 2020).

The Concept of Religion

The phenomenon of religion is intricate and multidimensional, encompassing a vast array of customs, rituals, beliefs, and cultural frameworks. It is commonly described as a belief and worship system that acknowledges the existence of a deity or higher force that directs people's moral and spiritual behavior (Pomerleau, 2020). A framework for comprehending the purpose of life, the nature of the cosmos, and human existence is provided by religion. Because of our common habits and beliefs, it also provides a feeling of belonging and community (Pomerleau, 2020). Religion is a multifaceted phenomenon that shapes the beliefs, practices, and social structures of individuals and communities.

Core belief systems address topics like the afterlife, the cosmos' origins, deities' nature, and life's meaning, forming the theological basis for rituals and behaviors. Rituals, including sacraments, fasting, prayer,

meditation, and worship, reinforce these beliefs and foster community connections (Pomerleau, 2020). Sacred texts, such as the Bible, Quran, Bhagavad Gita, and Torah, compile essential doctrines, moral principles, and rules, guide religious followers in living moral and fulfilling lives. Moral and ethical precepts provide behavioral guidelines emphasizing virtues like compassion, justice, integrity, and selflessness (Schäfer, 2020).

Religious experiences, including spiritual awakenings and mystical encounters, deepen personal faith and connect individuals to the divine. Community structures, such as churches and temples, also offer social frameworks for religious education and leadership, shaping individual and group identities. Symbols and artifacts, like the cross and Om, visually represent faith tenets and reinforce religious identity. Religion also impacts social and cultural practices, influencing laws, customs, literature, music, art, and political movements, often intersecting with governance issues. These dimensions collectively define religious life, influencing various human existence aspects and shaping worldviews. (Rezaei et al., 2020; Safara et al., 2020; Ahuja, 2022).

By influencing how people view their circumstances and their capacity for coping, religion has been demonstrated to offer resources for coping with circumstances that are viewed as dangerous or threatening (Van, 2020). According to Szcześniak (2020), religion plays three functions in the coping process: (a) giving life purpose; (b) giving the person a stronger sense of control over their circumstances; and (c) boosting self-esteem. A sense of family and community is something that religious organizations provide to a lot of people, especially those who have moved away from their families (Pomerleau, 2020).

Due to the beliefs, customs, symbols, and rituals that religion offers, it can also help people feel like they have an identity (Duggal and Sriram, 2022). Studies show that religion plays an important role in coping with stress. Prayer and faith in God have been cited as two of the most common coping resources (Ibrahim, 2020). Other coping resources include guidance from clergy and talking to God in prayer about how to deal with a particular stressful situation (Ibrahim, 2020). Pomerleau (2020) reported that when faced with a problem, religious individuals use a variety of religious coping resources that are drawn from spiritual, cognitive, behavioral, and social aspects of an individual's faith.

Religion has numerous beneficial effects on physical and mental health (Lorenz et al., 2019). Positive religious coping strategies, such as seeking support from church leadership, seeking God, and collaborating with God on solutions, are linked to positive mental health outcomes like emotional well-being, happiness, optimism, and hope (Edwards et al., 2023). Conversely, negative religious coping strategies, such as attributing stress to demonic presence or viewing stress as divine punishment, correlate with negative health outcomes like anxiety, depression, stress, and guilt (Surzykiewicz et al., 2022). Religion enhances the ability to cope with negative emotions and stress and provides a means to combat compulsive behavior (Waithaka et al., 2017).

Among undergraduate students, positive religious coping correlates strongly with positive psychological adjustment, happiness, and better adjustment when resolving life's challenges with God's help (Mahamid & Bdier, 2021). High self-worth and effective coping mechanisms, including spirituality and constructive religious strategies, improve students' capacity to handle stress (Graça & Brandão, 2024). Students with strong spiritual identities and perceived coping skills reported better mental health (Graça & Brandão, 2024). Surzykiewicz et al. (2022) found that religious coping improved life experiences for international students, irrespective of the stress type, despite these students reporting lower quality of life in physical and environmental aspects compared to domestic students. Religious coping is more predictive of well-being and good health than other coping mechanisms (Graça & Brandão, 2024). Pargament et al. (1998) noted that positive religious coping strategies, like having a strong spiritual connection to God and engaging in charitable activities, are linked to better well-being, while negative strategies, like spiritual discontent, are linked to poorer health.

College students often use a variety of coping mechanisms, including sexual activity, which can lead to hypersexuality or sexual addiction (Golder et al., 2023). Jennings (2021) found that hypersexuality among college students is linked to a lack of direction and unhealthy religious coping mechanisms. Negative religious coping techniques strongly predict hypersexuality (Jennings et al., 2021). Additionally, substance abuse,

including alcoholism, drug addiction, and binge drinking, is another stress-coping mechanism. Higher levels of religiosity correlate with lower rates of substance abuse (Jennings et al., 2021). Spiritual coping strategies are significantly linked to lower alcohol and drug use among college students (Gilbertson et al., 2022).

Positive religious coping leads to less frequent drug use, while negative religious coping leads to more frequent use (Surzykiewicz et al., 2022). French et al. (2022) also found that increased positive religious coping and decreased negative religious coping are associated with lower alcohol and drug use. Christians who actively grow their faith, sense God's presence, believe their lives have purpose, share their faith, and follow Jesus Christ's teachings are more likely to use faith as a coping mechanism and less likely to use negative coping mechanisms (Tozer, 2022). They report using their religion to release anger, seek forgiveness, and strengthen their connection with God (Tozer, 2022).

Empirical Review

Several studies have revealed the effect of problem focused and emotion focused coping mechanisms in reducing stress. Srivastava et al (2023) conducted a research among 501 respondents. This study's findings validated the relationship between perceived stress and coping, including emotion-focused and problem-focused coping. The study also found that participants dealt with stress by first using emotion-focused coping as an immediate resort, followed by problem-focused coping after a reappraisal of stress-inducing situations, and that this sequence of constant coping mechanisms helped them maintain their psychological health. Minchekar (2017) also investigated the effect of coping strategies on academic stress of 600 undergraduate college students.

The study revealed that coping mechanisms had a substantial impact on the level of academic stress experienced by college students. The study also found that students who do not employ any coping mechanisms experience severe academic stress. Furthermore, students who employ emotion-focused coping techniques are better suited to handle stress compared to those who utilise problem-focused solutions.

A study by Stanisławski (2019) found that problem-focused mechanisms were linked to better mental health outcomes when individuals perceived stressors as controllable. Similarly, Alkhawaldeh et al (2023) reported that students using problem-focused methods to handle academic stress reported higher academic performance and lower stress levels. In addition, (Vally & Ahmed, 2020) revealed that emotion regulation strategies, like reappraisal, were associated with better emotional well-being and social functioning while Algorani & Gupta (2023) affirmed that emotion-focused coping, such as seeking social support, mitigate the adverse effects of stress on physical health among students. However, Ding et al (2021) asserted that both coping strategies are beneficial, but their effectiveness varies depending on certain factors. While problem-focused coping is preferable for solvable problems, emotion-focused coping is crucial for dealing with uncontrollable situations, enhancing overall resilience and adaptive functioning. These studies establish the role that various coping mechanisms play in mitigating stress.

METHODOLOGY

The study employed the descriptive research of the survey design, basically to investigate the prevalence of spiritual and religiosity as coping strategy for academic stress among the undergraduate students of Bamidele Olumilua University of Education, Science and Technology, Ikere- Ekiti (BOUESTI), without any manipulation and to ensure that all sections of the population in consideration is effectively represented. The population of the study were the 12,740 students of the 2023/2024 Academic Session of the university from which a total of 450 students were selected as the sample size using multi stage sample and sampling technique. The study as well made use of a self- constructed questionnaire as the research instrument, the instrument was validated by ensuring the face, content and criterion validity, with reliability inclusive. A 0.72 and 0.83 correlations coefficient was obtained for both the construct validity (Convergent) and reliability (Test-Retest) respectively.

RESULTS

Research Question 1

- What are the academic coping strategy embraced by undergraduate students, in order of preference?

This question is answered descriptively, using frequency and percentages and the answer is presented in the table 1 below.

Table 1: Descriptive analysis of the choice of academic stress coping strategies identified by undergraduate students in order of preference

Academic Stress Coping Strategies	N	Percentage (%)
Religious Practices	272	62
Exercises	25	6
Socializing	58	13
Professional Counseling	5	1
Movie/Music	78	18

The table above explains the set of academic stress coping strategies preferred by the undergraduate students. The table showed that Religious Practices, Exercise, Socializing, Counselling and watching or listening to movies/music were the identified strategies leveraged on by the students. However, it was revealed that very many of the students considered leveraging on religious practices and activities more when it comes with dealing with academic stress. Watching or listening to movies/music was the second most preferred strategy followed by socializing with friends (chatting/social media), followed by exercise and counselling.

Hypothesis 1

Religious activities and other academic stress coping strategy will not significantly differ in their influence on academic stress

This hypothesis is tested using t-test analysis and the result is presented in the table 2 below.

Table 2: t-test analysis of the difference between the impact of religious and spiritual coping strategies and other coping methods on stress reduction among undergraduates

Variable	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	df	t	P-value
Impact of religious and spiritual coping strategies	438	39.93	22.813	437	7.383	0.000
Impact of other coping methods	438	31.01	9.267			

This table presents an analysis of the difference in impact between religious and spiritual coping strategies and other coping methods on stress reduction among undergraduates. The results show a significant difference in the mean impact, with religious and spiritual coping strategies having a mean score of 39.93, compared to 31.01 for other coping methods. This difference is further supported by a t-statistic of 7.383 and a p-value of 0.000.

Hypothesis 2

There exist no significant relationship between religious activities and academic stress

This hypothesis is tested using Pearson Product Moment Correlation and the result is presented in the table 3 below.

Table 3: a test of the relationship between religious activities and academic stress

Variables	N	r	Sig.
Academic Stress	438	-0.821	0.001
Religious Activities	438		

The table above presents the relationship between academic stress and religious activities. The table showed that there exist a negative and strong relationship between religious activities and academic stress at r (-0.821) and sig. (0.001). This implies that an increase in religious activities will bring about a reduction in academic stress, while a decrease in spiritual activities will lead to an increase in academic stress.

DISCUSSION

This study investigated the effect of religiosity as coping strategies for managing academic stress, in comparison with other coping strategies embraced by the undergraduates at Bamidele Olumilua University of Education, Science and Technology Ikere Ekiti (BOUESTI).

Different academic stress coping strategies considered by the students were considered, even in order of preference. The outcome have it that many of the students preferred religious activities, followed by movies/music, socializing, while exercise and counselling were the least considered/preferred strategy. This might be a reflection of our high level of spirituality in Nigeria and love for movies/music and social media that youth may never be tired of, meanwhile exercise is even considered another form of stress by many and counselling is mostly considered the last option our part of the world.

In addition to descriptive analyses, inferential analyses were conducted to further explore the significance of these practices. The results of hypothesis testing confirmed that students who engage more in spiritual and religious activities reported a significantly higher mean score in stress reduction compared to those who engage less. This finding is consistent with studies by Grim and Grim (2019), Ahmadi et al. (2023), and Graca and Brandao (2024), which show that religious activities enhance coping with social, psychological and academic stress.

Finally, the study found that religious coping strategies are more impactful than other methods for stress reduction among undergraduates, reinforcing the descriptive results. However, this finding diverges from those of Srivastava (2023) and Minchekar (2017). Srivastava highlighted emotion-focused and problem-focused approaches as effective for stress reduction and health recovery, while Minchekar emphasized the significant impact of various coping mechanisms on academic stress among college students. Meanwhile, this study also found the two variables to be negatively but strongly related, meaning that an increase in religious activities will reduce academic stress, indicating that religious activities are good academic stress coping mechanism.

CONCLUSION

This study concluded by affirming that religious activities is the most preferred and efficient academic stress coping mechanism by the undergraduate students. I was as well established that an increase in religious activities will help reduce academic stress, further indicating the effectiveness of religious activities as a good coping mechanism for academic stress.

RECOMMENDATION

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made:

- School management should take an active interest in the religious activities on campus, ensuring that they are properly supported and monitored.
- School management should establish relationships with spiritual and religious leaders on campus to foster collaboration and ensure the effectiveness of these activities.

- All forms of spiritual and religious beliefs should be respected and allowed to flourish, while ensuring proper monitoring and supervision to maintain a harmonious campus environment.
- Other stress coping strategies should be evaluated and modified, where necessary, to enhance their effectiveness in supporting students' mental health and academic success.

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