

Assessment of Stressors and Stress Management Strategies among Male and Female Undergraduates on their Health in Higher Institutions in Ondo State, Nigeria

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DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.909000591>

Received: 01 September 2025; Accepted: 07 September 2025; Published: 21 October 2025

ABSTRACT

This study specifically assessed common stressors and stress management strategies between of male and female undergraduate on their health in higher institutions in Ondo State, Nigeria

This Study employed a descriptive research design. A total of 500 (250 male and 250 female) undergraduates were used for this study. The instrument used for this research design was well-designed questionnaire with section A and B. Section A was for the demographic details, while section B was for the objectives of the study. The questionnaire was validated by experts on the area, and the pilot study was with administered test re-test method. The administration of the questionnaire was done with the help of four trained research assistants. The data were analyzed using percentages and chi-square. The findings revealed that many students said academic workload financial struggle, inadequate time management, social and personal challenges bring about stress and that various stress management strategies were used to relieve stress. There was a significant relationship between the common stressors faced on their health and the stress management strategies employed for their health and a significant relationship in the common stressors faced between undergraduate male and female.

It was recommended that Educational awareness campaigns should be raised for students' benefit. Access to scholarships, bursaries, and financial aid programme should be made available.

Keywords: Stressors, Stress Management, Strategies, Male and Female Undergraduate, Health

INTRODUCTION

Stress is humans' emotional, physical, or behavioural reactions to environmental/ecological change. It is termed as actions or reactions of tension, pressure and emotion, which is always in form of psychological and mental uneasiness. Stress is also known as a state of unease or mental pressure caused by challenging situations. It is a natural human response that stimulates individuals to address challenges and health threats in our lives. The heavy load of academic work in the institutions, social and personal challenges, the poor financial conditions and the necessity to achieve academic excellence are perceived as some of the major potential stressors are challenges that students have particularly Nigerian undergraduates' students.

Blonna (2005) defined stress as a stressor that results in the body's utilization of a stress response and also a mixture of a stressor and stress reactivity. A stressor has only the potential of stimulating a stress reaction. Stressor reactivity is the harsh process which gives meaning to the stressor as a cause of stress. A stressor is any physical, psychological, or environmental events or condition that starts the stress response (Fortner, 2002).

Stress is an unavoidable part of human life. Therefore, human cannot escape it. Stress is a multifaceted response to perceived threats or challenges, encompassing physiological, psychological, and behavioral components. (Lazarus & Folkman, 2005). Stress management strategies can be largely be categorized into problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Problem-focused coping involves addressing

directly the source of stress, such as creating study plans or seeking academic support. Emotion-focused coping, on the other hand, includes strategies aimed at managing emotional reactions, such as practicing mindfulness, exercising, or looking for social support (Ademola et al., 2021). Education in Nigeria is usually regarded as a path to socio-economic mobility, leading to massive burden from family and society for students to excel academically. But, studies have shown that there are systemic challenges intensifying stress levels among students in developing countries. (Ademola et al., 2021).

Tarafdar et al. (2019) stated that stress, if not accurately managed, can interrupt students' health negatively, leading to reduced concentration, poor academic performance in class, and even leading to absenteeism in school. According to Misra and McKean (2000), effective stress management do improves academic performance, also increases students' physical and psychological well-being. Students face various potential stressors on a daily basis. These include the challenge of inability to adjust to the campus life which is quite different from their home environments. Lifestyle adjustment is quite challenging. The more individual experiences life changes, the more stress the individual faces and the more likely illness and disease will appear (Greenberg, 1999).

Fadipe et al. (2023) stated that overloading of assignments and intense competitions among students are significant providers to academic stress. Height of academic expectations, pressure to achieve excellence, and time constraints can negatively impact students' mental health and general well-being. Exam tension, workload, and balancing academics with personal responsibilities can also contribute to heightened stress levels, possibly leading to burnout and reduced academic performance (Beiter et al. (2015). A study conducted by Weinstein et al. (2024), found that over 50% of 1,545 teens surveyed felt enormous pressure to have a distinct life plan and to achieve excellent events, leading to stress and burnout.

Schiffirin & Nelson (2010) highlighted excessive parental and societal expectations as result of maladaptive perfectionism, where students feel constant pressure to meet unworkable standards. High-achieving students often experience raised stress due to internalized expectations, which can harmfully affect their emotional well-being. Students from high-pressure academic environments are mostly vulnerable to anxiety, depression, and unhealthy coping mechanisms, for long-term emotional consequences (Luthar et al. (2013). Rafnsdóttir & Heijstra (2013) stated that students who work while studying regularly experience heightened stress levels, resulting in physical and emotional fatigue.

According to Schneiderman et al. (2005), body's three-stage responses to stress are alarm reaction, resistance, and exhaustion which can result in long-term health issues if stress is not adequately managed. But protracted stress deteriorates the immune system, making individuals more vulnerable to infections and inflammatory diseases. The goal of stress management is not to eliminate all stress. but, stress management techniques are designed to keep stress levels within an perfect range (Sapolsky, 2004). Mindfulness meditation has been shown to reduce stress, anxiety, and depression, while improving attention and emotional regulation (Kabat-Zinn, 1994). Physical activity which is another popular stress management technique has been seen to enhanced mood, reduced anxiety, and healthier sleep quality (American College of Sports Medicine, 2018).

Exercise also reinforces body muscles, including the heart, conserves muscle mass, and aids with weight management. Persons who exercise regularly are also at a reduced risk for some chronic diseases, as diabetes and hypertension (Warburton et al., (2006). According to Dunbar, (2017), Laughter reduces blood pressure and blood sugar levels; it also increases blood flow, and increases energy levels. Laughter causes the release of endorphins, which escalates pains tolerance and induce feelings of euphoria.

Barkur et al. (2020) established that students who embrace effective coping mechanisms, such as time management and seeking support, do perform better academically compared to those who rely on approaches like avoidance or substance use. Likewise, health outcomes, including physical fitness and mental stability, significantly influenced how individuals manage stress. Research has revealed that chronic stress can lead to mental health problems such as anxiety, depression, and burnout (American Psychological Association, 2020).

In a study conducted by Adasi et al. (2020) among undergraduate teacher education students at the University of Ghana, the researchers studied gender differences in stressors, perceived stress levels, and coping strategies,

and found out that female students reported higher stress levels, principally regarding academic workloads and health-related stressors. Although, these gender differences were not statistically significant, showing that both male and female students faced similar stressors within the academic environment. The authors further explained that female students were more likely to engage in ability to adapt with coping strategies such as praying, meditating, and seeking emotional support from friends and family. Contrary to this, male students displayed a tendency toward maladaptive coping mechanisms, including substance use and avoidance behaviors (Adasi et al. (2020).

A study carried out in Pakistan by Amin, Asadullah, and Sultan (2019), gender differences in perceived stress and coping strategies among undergraduate university students, showed that female students experienced higher levels of perceived stress compared to males. It was also seen that male students predominantly employed problem-focused strategies aimed at addressing the cause of stress directly; these were identified as time management and prioritizing tasks. Liu et al. (2024) investigated the effect of what they termed an “academic involution atmosphere” and found out that students operating in intense modest academic environments testified to elevated stress responses, which was mostly due to feelings of relative denial and continuous burden to outperform peers

Statement of the problem

Stress is the occurrence of physical and psychological response to academic, social and personal challenges that are perceived as difficult to cope with during the lives of undergraduates in higher institutions. This often results to sensitive or delicate stress levels.

Therefore, it is not clear the common stressors faced by these undergraduates and the stress management strategies applied; hence, this study.

Objectives of the study

1. Identify the common stressors faced by male and female undergraduate students’ on their health in higher institutions in Ondo State, Nigeria
2. Investigate the stress management strategies employed by male and female undergraduate students for their health in higher institutions in Ondo State.

Research Questions

1. What are the common stressors faced by male and female undergraduate students’ on their health in higher institutions in Ondo State, Nigeria?
2. What are the stress management strategies employed by male and female undergraduate students for their health in higher institutions in Ondo State?

Research Hypotheses

1. There will be no significant relationship between the common stressors faced by the undergraduates students’ on their health and the stress management strategies employed for their health by undergraduates in higher institutions.
2. There will be no significant relationship. in the common stressors faced between the male and female higher institution undergraduate students in Ondo State.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a descriptive research design. The population of this study comprised the undergraduate students of Ondo State higher institutions. The study comprised a sample size of 500 students’ selected higher institutions across Ondo State. A total of 250 male and 250 female students was selected using accidental sampling technique. The instrument used for this design was a questionnaire which consisted 2 sections namely section A and B. Section A was based on demographic data while section B focused on the research objectives for the study. Section B was based on 2 sub-sections such as subsection Bi, and Bii, which sought information

on the common stressors, faced stress management strategies. To ensure the validity of the instruments used, the questionnaire was given to experts for validation and test re-test was for the reliability which was deemed fit for the study. The questionnaire was in accordance with the research objectives. The researcher visited the selected institutions with the help of the 6 research assistants. The data collected were analyzed using descriptive statistics of frequency, percentages chi-square statistical tool.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Research question (i): What are the common stressors faced by the undergraduates students' on their health in higher institutions in Ondo State, Nigeria?

Table 2: Percentage Distribution of the stressors faced by undergraduates

S/N	Variables	MALE 250 (50%)				FEMALE 250 (50%)			
		SA	A	D	SD	SA	A	D	SD
1	I often feel oppressed and stressed by my academic workload, social and personal challenges.	120 (48%)	60 (24%)	40 (16%)	30 (12%)	110 (44%)	80 (32%)	30 (12%)	30 (12%)
2	I often feel stressed when I struggle financially.	80 (32%)	100 (40%)	40 (16%)	30 (12%)	120 (48%)	60 (24%)	35 (14%)	35 (14%)
3	Inadequate time management makes my academic workload and other social and personal challenges stressful	120 (48%)	60 (24%)	50 (20%)	20 (8%)	100 (40%)	80 (32%)	40 (16%)	30 (12%)
4	The pressure from family to meet academic performance and other social and personal challenges bring about stress.	100 (40%)	80 (32%)	40 (16%)	30 (12%)	100 (40%)	100 (40%)	20 (8%)	30 (12%)

Note: Strongly Agree=SA; A= Agree; D=Disagree; Strongly Agree= SD:

This table above provided the results of the key stressors faced by undergraduates. A total number of 180 (72%) male and 190 (76%) female respondents said they often felt oppressed and stressed by my academic workload and tight deadlines for assignments. A total number of 180 (72%) male and 180 (72%) female respondents stated that they often felt stressed when they struggled financially and that inadequate time management makes my academic workload, other social and personal challenges stressful. The pressure from my family to meet my academic performance and other social and personal challenges bring about stress. In the same vein, a total of 180 (72%) male and 200 (80%) female respondents identified that the pressure from my family to meet my academic performance and other social and personal challenges bring about stress. The findings revealed that all the 4 variables above made them stressful.

Research question (ii): What are the stress management strategies employed for their health by undergraduates in higher institutions in Ondo State?

Table 3: Percentage Distribution of the stress management strategies used by respondents

S/N	Stress Management Strategies	MALE 250 (50%)				FEMALE 250 (50%)			
		SA	A	D	SD	SD	A	D	SD
1	I engage in listening to Music to manage stress	95 (38%)	105 (42%)	20 (8%)	30 (12%)	50 (20%)	100 (40%)	30 (12%)	70 (28%)
2	I engage in meditating to manage stress	40 (16%)	35 (14%)	100 (40%)	75 (30%)	40 (16%)	30 (12%)	80 (32%)	100 (40%)
3	I engage in regular physical exercise to manage stress during study sessions	20 (8%)	30 (12%)	120 (48%)	80 (32%)	25 (10%)	25 (10%)	80 (32%)	120 (48%)

4	I engage in praying and religious activities to manage stress.	30 (12%)	30 (12%)	100 (40%)	90 (36%)	80 (32%)	120 (48%)	25 (10%)	25 (10%)
5	I engage in watching Movies/Videos to manage stress	100 (40%)	40 (16%)	30 (12%)	80 (32%)	30 (12%)	80 (32%)	40 (16%)	100 (40%)
6	I engage in rest and sleep to manage stress.	50 (20%)	50 (20%)	100 (40%)	50 (20%)	40 (16%)	30 (12%)	100 (40%)	80 (32%)
7	I create time to relax after school-related activities to improve my concentration on department workloads	30 (12%)	20 (8%)	120 (48%)	80 (32%)	60 (24%)	40 (16%)	60 (24%)	90 (36%)
8.	I socialize with friends and others to help relieve stress	100 (40%)	70 (28%)	40 (16%)	40 (16%)	100 (40%)	90 (36%)	30 (12%)	30 (12%)
9.	I eat a balanced and healthy diet to help improve my focus generally	40 (16%)	30 (12%)	100 (40%)	80 (32%)	60 (24%)	50 (20%)	60 (24%)	50 (20%)

NOTE: Strongly Agree=SA; A= Agree; D=Disagree; Strongly Agree= SD:

The table above outlined the distribution of stress management strategies employed by the undergraduates in higher institutions. It was observed that a total of 200 (80%) male and 150 (60%) female respondents stated that they engaged in listening to Music to manage stress. A total of 200 (80%) female respondents identified with engaging in praying and religious activities to manage stress, whereas 140 (56%) male respondents said they engaged in watching Movies/Videos to manage stress. A total of 170 (68%) male and 190 (76%) female respondents indicated that they socialized with friends and others to help relieve stress. However, items 2, 3, 6 and 7 were not averagely identified by the both male and female respondents.

Research Hypotheses

Research Hypothesis 1: There will be no significant relationship between the common stressors faced by the undergraduates students' on their health and the stress management strategies employed for their health by undergraduates in higher institutions

Table 4:- Distribution of χ^2 analyses on the relationship between the common stressors faced on their health and the stress management strategies employed for their health by undergraduates in higher institutions

Tab χ^2 Value	Level of significant	Df	Cal χ^2 Value	Decision
5.293	0.05	3	4.371	Rejected

The above table presented 5.293 as the table value which is higher than the calculated value of 4.371, degree of freedom = 3 at 0.05 level of significance. This indicated that there was a significant relationship between the common stressors faced by the undergraduates students' on their health and the stress management strategies employed for their health by undergraduates in higher institutions

Research Hypothesis 2: There will be no significant relationship in the common stressors faced between the male and female higher institution undergraduate students in Ondo State.

Table 5:- Distribution of χ^2 analyses on the relationship in the common stressors faced between male and female higher institution undergraduate students in the study area.

Tab χ^2 Value	Level of significant	Df	Cal χ^2 Value	Decision
7,872	0.05	3	3,104	Rejected

The above table showed the table chi-square value of 7.872 was higher than the calculated chi-square value of 3.104 under the degree of freedom of 3 at 0.05 level of significant. This implies that there was a significant relationship in the common stressors faced between the male and female higher institution undergraduate students in Ondo State.

Discussion of Findings

One of the findings revealed that academic workload and tight deadlines for assignments, financial struggle, inadequate time management, family pressure, social and personal challenges bring about stress. This is in line with Fadipe et al. (2023) and (Beiter et al. (2015), who stated that overload of assignments and intense competitions among students are significant providers to academic stress. Height of academic expectations, pressure to achieve excellence, and time constraints can negatively impact students' mental health and general well-being. Exam tension, workload, and balancing academics with personal responsibilities can also contribute to heightened stress levels. But contradicts the study conducted in Pakistan by Amin, et al (2019), showed that female students experienced higher levels of perceived stress compared to males. It was also seen that male students predominantly employed problem-focused strategies aimed at addressing the cause of stress directly.

Another finding stated that substantial number of the male and female respondents stated that they used some stress management strategies to relieve them of stress. These were - engaged in listening to Music to manage stress, - engaging in praying and religious activities to manage stress, and that - they socialized with friends and others to help relieve stress. These were the cogent variable identified by the both gender. This is similar to the statement of Sapolsky, (2004), who stated that the goal of stress management is not to eliminate all stress. And stress management techniques are designed to keep stress levels within a perfect range. But contradicts the study conducted in Pakistan by Amin, et al (2019), that gender differences were perceived in stress and coping strategies among undergraduate university students.

Further finding showed that very many of the stress management strategies were not identified by both male and female respondents. This could be that they were not aware of these strategies.

Another finding showed that there was a significant relationship between the common stressors faced by the undergraduates students' on their health and the stress management strategies employed for their health by undergraduates in higher institutions

Finally, finding showed that there was a significant relationship in the common stressors faced between male and female higher institutions undergraduate students in Ondo State. This is related to the finding of Adasi et al. (2020), that both male and female students faced similar stressors within the academic environment (Adasi et al. 2020).

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings of this research, the study established that undergraduate students experienced stress but could not use adequate stress management strategies.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations were made:

1. Higher institutions should incorporate time management workshops into orientation programs and academic curricula.
2. Educational campaigns should raise awareness about the benefits of active strategies like meditation and physical exercise. Workshops, fitness programs, and mindfulness sessions could be offered to encourage uptake by the higher institutions management.
3. Higher institutions management should expand access to scholarships, bursaries, and financial aid programme and the counseling services should address financial stress alongside academic pressures to provide complete support.
4. Higher institutions should promote consistent stress management by integrating wellness activities into academic schedules. And should foster peer support groups and social activities to encourage healthy interactions inform of study groups, recreational clubs, or stress-relief events to build community and reduce isolation.

5. Awareness programs should be mounted to make people know the importance of sleep and good food for healthy living. Nutrition workshops and access to affordable, balanced meals on campus could support these habits by the higher institutions management.

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