



PERCEIVED STRESS, COPING STRATEGIES, AND MENTAL HEALTH OUTCOMES AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN NORTHERN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

The mental health of university students has become a growing concern globally, particularly in low-resource settings where psychosocial support is limited. This study examined the relationship between perceived stress, coping strategies, and mental health outcomes among undergraduates in Northern Nigeria. Using a cross-sectional survey design, data were collected from 412 students across three universities in Borno, Yobe, and Kano States through standardized instruments: the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS-10), Brief COPE Inventory, and General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-12). Findings revealed a significant positive correlation between perceived stress and poor mental health ($r = 0.62$, $p < 0.01$), while adaptive coping strategies such as problem-solving and social support were negatively correlated with psychological distress ($r = -0.41$, $p < 0.05$). Gender and year of study were significant predictors of coping style preference. The study underscores the urgent need for structured mental health support systems within Nigerian universities, including peer counseling and resilience-building interventions.

Keywords: mental health, perceived stress, coping strategies, university students, psychosocial well-being, Northern Nigeria

1. Introduction

Mental health challenges among university students are increasingly recognized as a public health concern worldwide. The transition to university life often involves significant psychosocial adjustments, academic pressures, and financial constraints that may predispose students to stress and psychological distress (World Health Organization, 2022). In the Sahelian region of Nigeria, these stressors are compounded by insecurity, displacement, and limited access to mental health services.

Studies from sub-Saharan Africa indicate that over 35% of university students experience moderate to severe psychological distress (Okon et al., 2021). However, research focusing on Northern Nigeria remains scarce, despite unique sociocultural dynamics affecting coping and

mental health outcomes. This study, therefore, explores the interplay between perceived stress, coping strategies, and mental health among university students in this region.

2. Methodology

2.1 Study Design and Participants

A cross-sectional descriptive design was employed. The sample consisted of 412 undergraduate students selected through stratified random sampling from the University of Maiduguri, Bayero University Kano, and Federal University Gashua.

2.2 Instruments

Perceived Stress Scale (PSS-10) by Cohen et al. (1983) was used to assess perceived stress. Brief COPE Inventory (Carver, 1997) measured coping strategies. General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-12) assessed mental health outcomes.

2.3 Procedure and Ethical Considerations

Data collection was conducted after obtaining institutional ethical approval (Ref: SJPPS/ETH/2025/074). Participants provided informed consent and confidentiality was maintained throughout the process.

2.4 Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using SPSS Version 26. Descriptive statistics summarized demographic characteristics, while Pearson correlation and multiple regression were used to test hypotheses.

3. Results

Out of 412 respondents, 58% were female and 42% male, with an average age of 21.6 years. The mean perceived stress score was 26.4 (SD = 5.9), indicating moderate stress levels.

Correlation analysis showed a significant positive relationship between perceived stress and poor mental health ($r = 0.62$, $p < 0.01$). Adaptive coping strategies, particularly active coping and seeking emotional support, were negatively correlated with psychological distress ($r = -0.41$, $p < 0.05$). Maladaptive strategies such as denial and substance use were associated with poorer mental health outcomes.

Regression analysis indicated that perceived stress and coping style together accounted for 48% of the variance in mental health outcomes ($F(2,409) = 37.22$, $p < 0.001$).

4. Discussion

The findings affirm that high levels of perceived stress are significantly associated with negative mental health outcomes among university students. This aligns with previous studies in similar contexts (Ali & Musa, 2020; Eze et al., 2022). The protective role of adaptive coping strategies highlights the importance of psychosocial support systems and mental health education within tertiary institutions.

Gender differences observed in coping patterns may be linked to cultural expectations and emotional

expression norms prevalent in Northern Nigeria. Interventions should, therefore, be contextually sensitive and inclusive.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

The study concludes that perceived stress is a major determinant of poor mental health among university students in Northern Nigeria, but effective coping strategies can mitigate its impact. Universities should integrate mental health literacy programs, establish counseling centers, and promote peer support initiatives to enhance student resilience.

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