

## **Predicting Academic Engagement: The Role of Academic Stress and Coping Style among Undergraduates**

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### **Abstract**

Academic engagement is a crucial determinant of students' academic performance and psychological adjustment in higher education. However, the influence of academic stress and coping style on engagement remains underexplored in Nigerian universities. This study examined the predictive roles of academic stress (study despondency, worry about grades, workload, self-expectation, and pressure from study) and coping styles (active problem, active emotional, passive problem, and passive emotional coping) on academic engagement among undergraduate students of the University of Ibadan. A cross-sectional survey design was adopted, and 341 undergraduates participated, comprising 170 males (49.9%) and 171 females (50.1%). Data were collected using validated Educational Stress Scale for Adolescents (ESSA), Stress Coping Style Inventory (SCSI), and Academic Engagement Scale (AES). Multiple regression analyses were performed with the significance level set at 0.05. Results indicated that academic stress jointly predicted 3% of the variance in engagement ( $R = .19$ ,  $R^2 = .03$ ,  $F(5, 334) = 2.37$ ,  $p < .05$ ), with worry about grades emerging as the only significant independent predictor ( $\beta = .14$ ,  $t = 2.15$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Coping styles jointly predicted 18% of the variance in academic engagement ( $R = .43$ ,  $R^2 = .18$ ,  $F(4, 336) = 18.94$ ,  $p < .05$ ), with active problem coping independently and positively predicting engagement ( $\beta = .36$ ,  $t = 5.43$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Findings suggest that while certain dimensions of academic stress negatively affect engagement, students' use of adaptive coping strategies significantly enhances their involvement, dedication, and absorption in academic tasks. Interventions that reduce academic worry and promote effective coping strategies are recommended to support student engagement and overall academic success.

**Keywords:** *Academic Engagement, Academic Stress, Coping Style, Undergraduate Students, University of Ibadan*

### **Introduction**

The importance of academic engagement in determining students' academic achievement, perseverance, and psychological adjustment in higher education is becoming more widely acknowledged. It describes the degree of students' engagement, zeal, and dedication to learning activities, including their involvement in assignments, focus in class, and devotion of

mental and emotional energy to learning processes. When compared to their less involved peers, students who exhibit high levels of engagement typically exhibit higher levels of academic accomplishment, perseverance, and general educational satisfaction. As a result, research in education and psychology has placed a strong emphasis on comprehending the variables that affect academic engagement (Fredricks et al., 2004).

In contemporary higher education environments, undergraduate students are exposed to numerous academic demands that may challenge their psychological and emotional resources. These demands include heavy coursework, strict deadlines, examinations, competition for academic excellence, and expectations from lecturers and family members. When students perceive that these academic demands exceed their available coping resources, they often experience academic stress. Academic stress refers to the psychological distress associated with academic-related demands and pressures experienced during the learning process (Ruiz-Camacho and Gozalo, 2025). Research indicates that academic stress has become a widespread phenomenon among university students across the world due to increasing academic competition, changing learning environments, and rising expectations of academic performance (Zhang et al., 2024).

Academic stress may manifest through behavioural, cognitive, and emotional symptoms such as anxiety, decreased concentration, fatigue, irritability, and reduced academic motivation. These stress responses may significantly affect students' ability to concentrate on learning tasks and actively participate in academic activities. Empirical studies have shown that high levels of academic stress may negatively influence students' learning experiences, academic performance, and overall psychological well-being (Dogham et al., 2024).

Beyond its psychological consequences, academic stress may also influence the degree to which students remain engaged in their academic work. When academic stress becomes overwhelming, students may experience exhaustion, reduced motivation, and disengagement from learning activities. For instance, recent research has demonstrated that academic stress can directly and indirectly affect students' learning engagement through factors such as sleep quality, emotional regulation, and psychological resources (Liu et al., 2024; Zhang et al., 2024).

However, students do not respond to academic stress uniformly. Individual differences in coping mechanisms may determine whether academic stress results in adaptive outcomes or negative psychological consequences. Coping styles refer to the cognitive and behavioral strategies individuals employ to manage stressful situations. In academic settings, students may adopt various coping strategies such as problem-focused coping, emotional coping, avoidance, and social support seeking to manage academic demands.

Problem-focused coping strategies involve actively addressing the source of stress by organizing tasks, improving study habits, or seeking academic support. These strategies are often associated with improved academic adjustment and better academic outcomes. In contrast, maladaptive coping strategies such as avoidance, denial, or emotional withdrawal may worsen stress and reduce students' academic engagement. Research suggests that adaptive coping strategies can buffer the negative impact of stress on students' academic functioning, whereas maladaptive coping styles may exacerbate psychological distress (Okechukwu et al., 2022).

Studies conducted among university populations further highlight the importance of coping strategies in shaping students' academic experiences. For example, research examining stress and coping among undergraduates found that students who utilized proactive coping strategies demonstrated greater academic effectiveness and psychological adjustment compared to those relying on avoidance coping strategies (Xu et al., 2024).

The interaction between academic stress and coping style is therefore critical in understanding students' academic engagement. While moderate levels of stress may motivate students to increase their academic effort, excessive stress without effective coping mechanisms may lead to disengagement and burnout. Conversely, students who develop effective coping strategies are more likely to manage academic demands successfully and remain actively involved in learning activities.

Within the Nigerian higher education context, academic stress has become a growing concern due to several contextual factors such as overcrowded classrooms, limited academic resources, unstable academic calendars, and intense competition among students. These challenges may increase the pressure experienced by undergraduate students and potentially affect their academic engagement. Despite the increasing attention given to student well-being in higher education, there remains limited empirical research examining how academic stress and coping style influence academic engagement among Nigerian university students.

The University of Ibadan, as the oldest and most prestigious university in Nigeria, hosts a large and diverse undergraduate population exposed to demanding academic expectations. Investigating how academic stress and coping style influence students' engagement within this context is therefore essential for developing evidence-based interventions aimed at improving students' academic experiences and psychological well-being.

Although a growing body of literature has examined academic stress and coping strategies among university students, much of this research has predominantly focused on outcomes such as academic performance and psychological distress rather than academic engagement. For instance, studies by Misra and McKean (2000), Kausar (2010), and Pascoe et al. (2020) have largely emphasized stress-related outcomes such as anxiety, depression, and academic performance. Similarly, coping-focused studies, including those by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) and more recent extensions (e.g., Carver & Connor-Smith, 2019), have primarily explored how individuals manage stress with respect to psychological adjustment rather than their engagement in academic tasks.

However, relatively limited empirical attention has been directed toward understanding how academic stress (study despondency, worry about grade, workload, self-expectation and pressure from study) and coping style (active emotional, active problem coping, passive emotional coping and passive problem coping) shape students' active involvement, vigor, dedication, and absorption in learning activities, as conceptualized in engagement literature (e.g., Fredricks et al., 2004; Schaufeli et al., 2002). This gap is even more pronounced within the Nigerian higher education context, where contextual stressors such as financial constraints, intense academic competition, infrastructural challenges, and large class sizes

may uniquely influence both coping processes and academic engagement (e.g., Ugwu et al., 2013).

Given the potential implications of academic stress and coping style for students' engagement and academic outcomes, it is important to examine how these psychological factors interact to influence students' participation in academic activities. Understanding these relationships may help educators, psychologists, and university administrators design appropriate support systems that enhance students' coping capacity and promote active engagement in learning. Therefore, this study seeks to examine academic stress (study despondency, worry about grade, workload, self-expectation and pressure from study) and coping style (active emotional, active problem coping, passive emotional coping and passive problem coping) as predictors of academic engagement among undergraduates of University of Ibadan.

### **Theoretical Underpinning**

This study is anchored in the Transactional Theory of Stress and Coping. This theory provides an important framework for understanding how individuals experience and respond to stress in different environments. The theory was originally developed by Richard Lazarus in 1966 and was later expanded in collaboration with Susan Folkman in their influential works on psychological stress and coping. The theory conceptualizes stress not merely as a stimulus from the environment or as an individual response, but as a dynamic interaction between the individual and the environment (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). In this view, stress emerges when individuals perceive that environmental demands exceed their personal resources for coping.

According to the theory, stress is therefore a transactional process that depends largely on how individuals evaluate and respond to situations they encounter. Lazarus (1991) argues that although environmental conditions may present potential stressors, the extent to which these conditions become stressful depends primarily on individuals' perceptions and interpretations of those situations. In academic settings, this implies that students may respond differently to similar academic demands such as examinations, coursework, and grading expectations depending on how they interpret these demands and the coping resources available to them.

Two major psychological processes are central to the Transactional Theory of Stress: cognitive appraisal and coping. Cognitive appraisal refers to the process through which individuals evaluate whether a particular situation is threatening, challenging, or irrelevant to their well-being (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). This evaluation occurs in two stages: primary appraisal and secondary appraisal.

Primary appraisal involves an individual's initial evaluation of whether an event poses a threat, harm, or challenge. In the context of academic life, students may interpret academic demands such as examinations or coursework as threatening if they believe they may fail or perform poorly. Alternatively, students may perceive these demands as challenges that provide opportunities for learning and achievement. When academic situations are appraised as challenges rather than threats, students are more likely to experience positive emotions and maintain engagement in their academic activities (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2020).

Secondary appraisal occurs when individuals assess their available resources and coping options to manage the situation. At this stage, students evaluate whether they possess the

necessary abilities, strategies, and support systems to deal with academic demands. For example, a student who believes they have effective study strategies, emotional regulation skills, and social support may perceive academic challenges as manageable. Conversely, students who perceive themselves as lacking sufficient coping resources may experience greater psychological stress and disengagement from academic activities.

Coping, the second central concept of the theory, refers to the cognitive and behavioral efforts individuals employ to manage stressful situations. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) identified two broad forms of coping: problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping. Problem-focused coping involves actions directed toward addressing the source of stress, such as organizing study schedules, seeking academic assistance, or improving time management skills. Emotion-focused coping, on the other hand, involves strategies aimed at regulating emotional responses to stress, such as seeking emotional support, practicing relaxation techniques, or engaging in positive reappraisal.

Recent research continues to support the relevance of the Transactional Theory of Stress in explaining students' responses to academic demands. For example, Pascoe, Hetrick, and Parker (2020) note that university students frequently encounter academic stressors related to examinations, heavy coursework, and performance expectations. However, the extent to which these stressors affect students' academic functioning depends largely on their coping strategies and perceptions of control. Similarly, Liu, Shi, and Gao (2024) found that students who adopt adaptive coping strategies are more likely to maintain positive academic experiences and remain engaged in learning activities despite experiencing academic stress.

The present study applies the Transactional Theory of Stress to explain how academic stress and coping style influence academic engagement among undergraduate students of the University of Ibadan. Within this framework, academic stressors such as workload, pressure from study, self-expectations, study despondency, and worry about grades represent environmental demands encountered by students in the university environment. Students' cognitive appraisal of these demands determines whether they perceive them as threats or manageable challenges.

When students interpret academic demands as overwhelming and beyond their control, they may experience negative emotional reactions such as anxiety, frustration, and discouragement. These negative emotional responses may reduce their psychological involvement in academic activities, thereby lowering academic engagement. Conversely, when students perceive academic challenges as manageable and believe they possess adequate coping resources, they are more likely to maintain enthusiasm, dedication, and persistence in their academic work.

Coping style therefore play a crucial mediating role in the relationship between academic stress and academic engagement. Students who adopt adaptive coping strategies such as problem-solving, emotional regulation, and seeking social support are better equipped to manage academic stress effectively. As a result, they are more likely to remain actively engaged in academic tasks. On the other hand, students who rely on maladaptive coping strategies such as avoidance, denial, or withdrawal may experience heightened stress and decreased engagement in academic activities (Carver & Connor-Smith, 2019).

The Transactional Theory of Stress is therefore particularly relevant for the present study because it highlights the interactive relationship between academic stressors and coping

processes in shaping students' academic engagement. The theory suggests that academic engagement is not determined solely by the presence of stressors but also by how students interpret and cope with those stressors. Understanding this interaction provides valuable insight into how universities can design interventions that help students manage academic stress and maintain sustained engagement in their academic pursuits.

## **Empirical Review of Related Studies**

### **Academic Stress and Academic Engagement**

Academic stress has become a major concern in higher education due to its implications for students' psychological well-being and learning outcomes. Stress is generally conceptualized as a psychological state that arises when individuals perceive a discrepancy between environmental demands and their available coping resources (Pascoe, Hetrick, & Parker, 2020). Within the academic context, stress occurs when students perceive academic demands such as examinations, assignments, and performance expectations as overwhelming or exceeding their ability to cope effectively. Academic stress is therefore widely regarded as a multidimensional phenomenon involving emotional, cognitive, and physiological responses to academic challenges.

Recent studies indicate that academic stress is highly prevalent among university students across the world. Pascoe et al. (2020) conducted a systematic review of stress among higher education students and found that academic workload, examinations, and time pressure are the most common stressors experienced by students. Persistent exposure to these stressors has been linked to psychological distress, reduced motivation, and diminished academic functioning. Similarly, Liu, Shi, and Gao (2024) reported that excessive academic stress may reduce students' academic satisfaction and concentration, thereby limiting their ability to remain actively involved in learning activities.

In the Nigerian context, academic stress among university students has received increasing scholarly attention. For instance, a recent study among undergraduates at Obafemi Awolowo University found a high prevalence of academic stress resulting from fear of failure, academic workload, and competition for grades. The study revealed that more than two-thirds of students experienced stress related to examinations and academic expectations, highlighting the significant psychological pressure faced by undergraduates in Nigerian universities (Ogundele, Adewumi, & Aruna, 2025).

Similarly, Eneogu, Obiora, and Okafor (2024) examined academic stress among students of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, and found that post-pandemic academic adjustments significantly increased students' stress levels and negatively affected their mental health. The authors concluded that academic stress remains a major challenge for university students, particularly when institutional demands increase without adequate support systems.

Other Nigerian studies have also demonstrated the negative implications of academic stress for students' academic experiences. Hassan, Jimoh, and Idris (2024) examined the relationship between academic stress and coping strategies among students of the Federal University of Lafia and found that academic stress was significantly associated with poor academic outcomes. The study further noted that persistent stress may undermine students' academic functioning and psychological well-being.

Academic engagement, on the other hand, refers to the degree to which students are psychologically and behaviorally involved in their academic activities. It is widely conceptualized as a positive state characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption in academic tasks (Schaufeli, Salanova, González-Romá, & Bakker, 2002). Vigor reflects students' energy and persistence in academic work; dedication represents their sense of significance and enthusiasm toward their studies; while absorption describes deep concentration and immersion in learning activities.

Empirical research suggests that academic engagement plays a critical role in determining students' academic success and psychological adjustment. Highly engaged students tend to demonstrate stronger persistence, greater academic achievement, and more positive attitudes toward learning (Li, Peng, & Fan, 2023). Conversely, low engagement has been associated with poor academic outcomes, academic burnout, and withdrawal from learning activities.

The relationship between academic stress and academic engagement has therefore become an important area of inquiry in educational psychology. Several studies suggest that excessive academic stress may undermine engagement by reducing students' energy levels, concentration, and motivation. For instance, Onyinyechukwu et al. (2024) found that excessive academic workload among Nigerian university students contributed to psychological distress and reduced participation in academic activities.

Nevertheless, the relationship between academic stress and engagement is not always straightforward. Some scholars argue that moderate levels of stress may enhance students' motivation and encourage them to invest greater effort in their academic work. However, when stress becomes chronic or overwhelming, it often leads to emotional exhaustion and disengagement from academic activities.

Despite the growing literature on academic stress, several limitations remain evident. First, many studies have focused primarily on academic performance rather than academic engagement. While academic performance reflects measurable outcomes such as grades, academic engagement captures students' behavioral, emotional, and cognitive involvement in learning processes. Second, most existing studies have examined academic stress in isolation without considering the psychological mechanisms that may influence how students respond to stress.

Furthermore, empirical studies examining academic stress within Nigerian universities remain relatively limited compared to those conducted in Western contexts. Given the unique academic, socio-economic, and institutional challenges faced by students in Nigerian universities, it is important to investigate how academic stress influences students' academic engagement within this specific context. Addressing this gap provides a stronger contextual understanding of students' academic experiences in Nigerian higher education institutions.

### **Coping Style and Academic Engagement**

Coping style refer to the cognitive and behavioral strategies individuals employ to manage stressful situations. In academic settings, coping strategies determine how students respond to academic challenges and whether they are able to maintain effective functioning despite stress. Coping has been widely defined as the cognitive and behavioral efforts used to

manage internal or external demands that are perceived as exceeding one's resources (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2020).

Coping strategies are commonly categorized into problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping. Problem-focused coping involves efforts aimed at addressing the source of stress directly, such as seeking academic assistance, organizing study schedules, and improving learning strategies. Emotion-focused coping involves strategies aimed at regulating emotional responses to stress, including avoidance, denial, or distraction (Carver & Connor-Smith, 2019).

Empirical studies have shown that coping style play a significant role in shaping students' academic experiences and engagement. Students who adopt adaptive coping strategies tend to demonstrate higher levels of psychological resilience and academic involvement. For example, Liu et al. (2024) found that positive coping strategies helped reduce the negative impact of academic stress on students' academic experiences. Students who engaged in proactive coping behaviors such as seeking academic support and organizing study routines were more likely to remain actively involved in academic tasks.

In the Nigerian context, Hassan et al. (2024) found that undergraduate students adopt various coping strategies to manage academic stress, including social support, recreational activities, and time management techniques. However, the study also revealed that ineffective coping strategies may lead to poor academic outcomes and reduced academic productivity.

Similarly, research conducted among university students in Lagos indicated that financial stress and other academic pressures influence students' coping mechanisms and psychological well-being. The study reported that students often rely on both adaptive and maladaptive coping strategies when dealing with academic challenges (Olusina, 2025).

Although empirical studies acknowledge the importance of coping strategies in students' academic experiences, relatively few studies have examined how coping style influence academic engagement specifically. Much of the existing literature focuses on coping strategies and academic performance rather than engagement, thereby overlooking an important dimension of students' academic behavior.

Another limitation of existing research is the scarcity of empirical studies examining coping styles within African higher education contexts. Most coping research has been conducted in Western universities, where educational environments and socio-economic conditions differ significantly from those found in many African institutions. Consequently, the applicability of these findings to Nigerian universities may be limited.

Therefore, there is a need for further empirical research that simultaneously examines academic stress, coping styles, and academic engagement, particularly within Nigerian universities. Investigating these variables together will provide deeper insight into how students manage academic challenges and how these coping mechanisms influence their level of engagement in academic activities. This present study examine how academic stress (study despondency, worry about grade, workload, self-expectation and pressure from study) and coping style (active emotional, active problem coping, passive emotional coping and passive problem coping) predict academic engagement among undergraduates of University of Ibadan. The specific objectives are to:

- i. To investigate the significant relationship between academic stress (study despondency, worry about grade, workload, self-expectation and pressure from study) and academic engagement among undergraduate students of University of Ibadan.
- ii. To examine the significant relationship between coping style (active emotional, active problem coping, passive emotional coping and passive problem coping) and academic engagement among undergraduate students of University of Ibadan.

Based on the above reviewed literature, the following hypotheses would be tested;

### **Hypotheses**

- i. Academic stress (study despondency, worry about grade, workload, self-expectation and pressure from study) will have a significant joint and independent influence on academic engagement among undergraduate students of University of Ibadan.
- ii. Coping style (active emotional, active problem coping, passive emotional coping and passive problem coping) will have a significant influence on academic engagement among undergraduate students of University of Ibadan.

### **Method**

#### **Research Design**

This study adopted a cross-sectional quantitative research design, which involved collecting data from participants at a single point in time. This approach was appropriate for examining the relationships among variables as they naturally occur, without any form of manipulation. It enabled the researcher to investigate how academic stress (study despondency, worry about grade, workload, self-expectation and pressure from study) and coping style (active emotional, active problem coping, passive emotional coping and passive problem coping) influence academic engagement among undergraduate of University of Ibadan, Nigeria.

A quantitative survey method was utilized because it allows for the systematic and objective measurement of psychological constructs through standardized instruments. This method also supports the use of statistical techniques, such as multiple regression to test the study's hypotheses. Additionally, the design is well-suited for exploring variations in academic stress, coping style and engagement levels within their real academic environment. The cross-sectional nature of the study further made it practical and efficient, as it captured students' academic and psychological experiences within a specific period of the academic session, where such experiences are relatively consistent.

#### **Research Setting**

The study was carried out at the University of Ibadan (UI), located in Ibadan, Oyo State, Nigeria. Founded in 1948, the University of Ibadan is the oldest degree-awarding university in Nigeria and is widely recognized for its academic excellence within sub-Saharan Africa. The institution hosts a large and diverse undergraduate population drawn from different socio-economic, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds across the country.

The selection of the University of Ibadan was intentional for several reasons. As a leading federal university, it offers a highly competitive academic environment with structured programmes and strong performance expectations, making it suitable for studying academic stress and engagement. In addition, the diversity of students across multiple faculties enhances the representativeness of the sample within the Nigerian university system. The university's established administrative structure also made it easier to access participants and adhere to ethical standards during data collection. Overall, the institution provides a relevant context for understanding undergraduate academic experiences in Nigeria.

### **Sample Size and Sampling Technique**

A multi-stage sampling procedure was adopted for this study. Initially, selected faculties such as Social Sciences, Arts, Science, and Education were included to ensure coverage across different academic disciplines. Within these faculties, participants were recruited using a convenience sampling approach based on availability and willingness to participate. To determine the minimum sample size required for adequate statistical power, Slovin's formula was used:  $(n = N / [1 + Ne^2])$ , Where:

$N$  represents the estimated undergraduate population,

$e$  represents the margin of error (0.05).

Based on this calculation, a minimum of 384 participants was required. However, to address potential issues such as incomplete or invalid responses, additional questionnaires were distributed. In total, 341 properly completed questionnaires were retrieved and used for the final analysis.

The study included both male and female undergraduate students. To be eligible, participants were required to:

- (i) be full-time undergraduate students of the University of Ibadan,
- (ii) fall within the age range of 16 to 30 years,
- (iii) provide informed consent, and
- (iv) participate voluntarily in the study.

### **Instruments**

For the purpose of this study, the researcher used the following scales:

#### **Section A: Demographic Information**

This section consists of the demographic variables such as age, gender, level of study, faculty and parental educational background.

#### **Section B: Educational stress scale for adolescents (ESSA)**

Academic stress was assessed using the Educational Stress Scale for Adolescents (ESSA) developed by Sun, Dunne, Hou, and Xu (2011). The instrument consists of 16 items measured on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). It is designed to capture different dimensions of academic stress experienced by students. The scale comprises five sub-dimensions: pressure from study (four items reflecting perceived

pressure from academic demands, parents, peer competition, and future expectations), workload (three items assessing the burden of assignments, schoolwork, and examinations), worry about grades (three items measuring stress related to dissatisfaction with academic performance), self-expectation (three items focusing on stress arising from unmet personal academic standards), and despondency (three items reflecting feelings of discouragement, low confidence, and reduced concentration in academic activities). The original authors reported a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .82 for the overall scale, with subscale reliabilities of .79, .73, .69, .65, and .64, respectively. In the present study, the internal consistency coefficients for the subscales were .65, .71, .69, .64, and .51. The overall reliability of the 16-item scale in this study was found to be .81, indicating acceptable internal consistency.

### **Section C: Stress coping style inventory (SCSI)**

Coping styles were measured using the Stress Coping Style Inventory (SCSI) developed by Lin and Chen (2010). The instrument contains 28 items designed to assess how students cope with stress within the university environment, including situations related to academic activities, peer interactions, and other social or formal settings. Responses were rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The scale is divided into four dimensions: active emotional coping (items 1–8), passive emotional coping (items 9–14), active problem coping (items 15–20), and passive problem coping (items 21–28). The original developers reported Cronbach's alpha coefficients of .88, .87, .86, and .86 for the four subscales respectively, with an overall reliability coefficient of .83. In the present study, the internal consistency coefficients obtained were .83 for active emotional coping, .75 for passive emotional coping, .80 for active problem coping, and .68 for passive problem coping. The overall reliability of the scale in this study was .80, indicating satisfactory internal consistency.

### **Section D: Academic Engagement Scale (AES)**

Academic engagement was assessed using the Academic Engagement Scale (AES) developed by Krause and Coates (2008). The scale consists of 10 items that measure the extent to which students are actively involved in their academic activities. Each item is rated on a 5-point scale: 1 (never), 2 (on occasion), 3 (some of the time), 4 (most of the time), and 5 (all of the time). Total scores range from 10 to 50, with higher scores indicating greater levels of academic engagement, and lower scores reflecting reduced engagement. The original authors reported an internal consistency coefficient of .67 for the scale. In the current study, analysis of the 10 items yielded a Cronbach's alpha of .73, suggesting acceptable reliability for measuring academic engagement among the participants.

### **Procedure**

The study investigated the predictive roles of academic stress (workload, worry about grades, self-expectation, study despondency, and pressure from study) and coping style (active emotional, active problem coping, passive emotional coping and passive problem coping) on academic engagement among undergraduates of University of Ibadan. Data collection was conducted over a six-week period during the first semester of the academic session. Prior to data collection, approval was obtained from relevant university authorities as well as faculty representatives. Participants were approached during lecture periods and were briefed on the purpose of the study, emphasizing that participation was entirely voluntary. Informed consent was obtained before administering the questionnaires. The instruments were distributed and

completed within classroom settings to ensure a high response rate. Participants responded anonymously, and no personal identifying information was collected, thereby ensuring confidentiality. A total of 400 questionnaires were administered, out of which 341 were properly completed and deemed suitable for analysis after screening for incomplete responses. The completed questionnaires were collected immediately and stored securely. Subsequently, the data were coded and entered into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) for analysis.

## Data Analysis

The data collected were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). To ensure the reliability of the instruments, Cronbach's alpha coefficients were computed for each scale to assess their internal consistency. To test the study hypotheses, multiple regression analysis was performed to examine the predictive roles of academic stress (workload, worry about grades, self-expectation, study despondency, and pressure from study) and coping style (active emotional, active problem coping, passive emotional coping and passive problem coping) on academic engagement. In addition, appropriate inferential statistics were applied where necessary to explore group differences. All hypotheses were tested at a 0.05 level of significance.

## Results

### Hypothesis One

Academic stress (study despondency, worry about grade, workload, self-expectation and pressure from study) will have significant influence on Academic engagement among University of Ibadan undergraduate students. This was tested using multiple regression analysis and the result is presented on Table 1;

**Table 1: Summary of Multiple regression Showing academic stress constructs as predictors of academic engagement**

Variables	B	t-value	Sig	R	R <sup>2</sup>	F	P
Pressure from study	.06	.85	>.05				
Workload	-.10	-1.65	>.05				
Worry about grade	.14	2.15	<.05	.19	.03	2.37	<.05
Self-expectation	.03	.45	>.05				
Study despondency	-.03	-.45	>.05				

Table 1 presents the joint and independent influence of academic stress (study despondency, worry about grade, workload, self-expectation and pressure from study) on academic engagement among University of Ibadan undergraduate students.

It was found that academic stress (study despondency, worry about grade, workload, self-expectation and pressure from study) had significant influence on academic engagement at {R= .19; R<sup>2</sup>= .03 F (5, 334) = 20.33; p<.05}. This implies that jointly, academic stress (study despondency, worry about grade, workload, self-expectation and pressure from study) predicted about 3% variance on academic engagement among University of Ibadan undergraduate students. In simpler terms, academic stress does play a role in how engaged students are in their studies, but its overall impact is relatively small. Further analysis shows

that only worry about grade  $\{\beta = .14; t = 2.15; p < .05\}$  independently predicted academic engagement. This suggests that students who are more concerned about their grades are slightly more likely to be engaged in their academic work. Other factors such as study despondency, workload, self-expectation and pressure from study did not independently predict engagement. Based on these findings, the hypothesis was only partially supported.

## Hypothesis Two

Coping style (active emotional, active problem coping, passive emotional coping and passive problem coping) will have significant influence on Academic engagement among University of Ibadan undergraduate students. This was tested using multiple regression analysis and the result is presented on Table 2;

**Table 2: Summary of Multiple regression Showing coping style constructs as predictors of academic engagement**

Variables	B	t-value	Sig	R	R <sup>2</sup>	F	P
Active emotional coping	-.02	-.33	>.05				
Passive emotional coping	.07	1.10	>.05	.43	.18	18.94	<.05
Active problem coping	.36	5.43	<.05				
Active emotional coping	-.03	.22	>.05				

Table 2 presents the joint and independent influence of coping styles (active emotional, active problem coping, passive emotional coping and passive problem coping) on academic engagement among University of Ibadan undergraduate students. It was found that coping style (active emotional, active problem coping, passive emotional coping and passive problem coping) had significant influence on academic engagement at  $\{R = .43; R^2 = .18 F(4, 336) = 18.94; p < .05\}$ .

This implies that jointly, coping style (active emotional, active problem coping, passive emotional coping and passive problem coping) predicted about 18% variance on academic engagement among University of Ibadan undergraduate students. In simpler terms, how students cope with stress plays an important role in how actively they participate in their academic work. Compared to academic stress, coping style had a stronger impact on engagement. Further analysis shows that only active emotional coping  $\{\beta = .36; t = 5.43; p < .05\}$  independently predicted academic engagement. This suggests that students who manage their emotions in a positive and proactive way such as staying calm, regulating feelings, and maintaining a positive outlook are more likely to be engaged in their studies. Other coping style, including active problem coping, passive emotional coping, and passive problem coping, did not independently predict academic engagement. Therefore, the hypothesis was partially supported.

## Discussion of Findings

The present study examined the predictive roles of academic stress (study despondency, worry about grade, workload, self-expectation and pressure from study) and coping style

(active emotional, active problem coping, passive emotional coping and passive problem coping) on academic engagement among undergraduate students of University of Ibadan. Two hypotheses were formulated and tested.

### **Academic Stress and Academic Engagement**

The first hypothesis examined whether academic stress, operationalized through study despondency, worry about grade, workload, self-expectation, and pressure from study, would significantly predict academic engagement among undergraduate students. The results of the multiple regression analysis revealed that academic stress variables jointly had a significant influence on academic engagement, accounting for approximately 3% of the variance in academic engagement among the students. However, further analysis showed that only worry about grade independently predicted academic engagement, while other dimensions of academic stress such as workload, self-expectation, pressure from study, and study despondency did not significantly predict engagement.

The finding that academic stress variables jointly predicted academic engagement is consistent with existing empirical literature suggesting that stress experienced within academic environments can influence students' involvement in learning activities. Previous research has demonstrated that academic stress may shape students' motivation, persistence, and emotional investment in academic tasks (Pascoe, Hetrick, & Parker, 2020). Similarly, Liu, Shi, and Gao (2024) reported that academic stress affects students' academic experiences by influencing their psychological involvement and ability to remain actively engaged in academic tasks.

The significant independent influence of worry about grade on academic engagement suggests that students' concerns about academic performance may serve as an important motivational factor that drives academic involvement. This finding aligns with the argument that moderate performance-related anxiety may stimulate students to invest greater effort in their academic work in order to achieve desired outcomes. Supporting this view, Li, Peng, and Fan (2023) found that students who place strong importance on academic achievement often demonstrate higher levels of academic engagement because they perceive academic success as personally meaningful and important.

Similarly, Zhao (2024) reported that concerns about academic performance may motivate students to increase their academic effort and persistence, particularly when students perceive academic success as central to their future goals. Within the Nigerian university context, academic performance is often strongly associated with career prospects and social mobility. Consequently, students may respond to concerns about their grades by becoming more psychologically involved in their studies.

However, the finding that other components of academic stress such as workload, self-expectation, pressure from study, and study despondency did not independently predict academic engagement contrasts with some previous studies that have found strong negative relationships between academic stress and engagement. For instance, Pascoe et al. (2020) reported that excessive academic workload and time pressure often lead to emotional exhaustion and reduced academic engagement among university students. Similarly, Onyinyechukwu et al. (2024) found that high academic workload among Nigerian students was associated with psychological distress and reduced participation in academic activities.

The absence of significant independent effects for most stress dimensions in the present study may be explained by contextual factors within the university environment. It is possible that students in highly competitive academic institutions such as the University of Ibadan may have developed adaptive strategies that allow them to cope with academic demands without significantly reducing their engagement. In such environments, academic stress may be perceived as a normal part of the educational process rather than a debilitating experience.

Another possible explanation relates to the relatively small variance explained by academic stress (3%) in the present study. This suggests that while academic stress may influence academic engagement, it may not be the most powerful determinant of engagement among undergraduate students. Other psychological variables such as academic motivation, coping strategies, and self-efficacy may play a more substantial role in shaping students' academic engagement.

The findings suggest that performance-related concerns, particularly worry about grades, may function as a motivational driver of engagement, whereas other forms of academic stress may not necessarily translate into reduced or increased academic engagement among students.

### **Coping Style and Academic Engagement**

The second hypothesis examined whether coping style specifically active emotional coping, active problem coping, passive emotional coping, and passive problem coping would significantly predict academic engagement among undergraduate students. The results showed that coping styles jointly had a significant influence on academic engagement, explaining approximately 18% of the variance in academic engagement. However, only active emotional coping independently predicted academic engagement, while the other coping styles did not show significant independent effects.

The significant joint influence of coping styles on academic engagement is consistent with existing literature emphasizing the importance of coping strategies in shaping students' responses to academic challenges. Coping strategies determine how students manage stress and maintain psychological functioning in demanding academic environments (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2020). Students who employ adaptive coping strategies are more likely to sustain motivation and remain actively involved in academic activities.

The finding that active emotional coping significantly predicted academic engagement suggests that students who effectively regulate their emotional responses to academic challenges may be better able to maintain their engagement in academic tasks. Emotional coping strategies such as seeking emotional support, maintaining optimism, and managing stress-related emotions may help students sustain their psychological involvement in academic work despite experiencing stress.

This finding is supported by Liu et al. (2024), who reported that students who employ adaptive coping strategies demonstrate greater resilience in the face of academic stress and are more likely to remain actively engaged in learning activities. Similarly, Carver and Connor-Smith (2019) argued that effective emotional regulation plays an important role in maintaining motivation and persistence in challenging situations.

However, the finding that active problem-focused coping did not independently predict academic engagement contrasts with several previous studies. Problem-focused coping strategies, such as seeking academic assistance, organizing study schedules, and addressing academic difficulties directly, have often been associated with improved academic outcomes and higher levels of engagement. For example, Wu et al. (2024) found that problem-focused coping significantly predicted academic engagement among university students by enabling them to manage academic demands more effectively.

The lack of significant influence of problem-focused coping in the present study may be attributed to contextual factors within the study population. It is possible that students rely more heavily on emotional coping strategies to manage stress associated with academic demands rather than directly addressing the sources of stress. Cultural and social factors may also influence students' preference for emotional support and interpersonal coping mechanisms.

Furthermore, the non-significant influence of passive coping strategies observed in the present study is consistent with existing literature suggesting that avoidance-based coping strategies are generally ineffective in promoting positive academic outcomes. Passive coping strategies such as denial, withdrawal, and procrastination may temporarily reduce stress but often fail to address underlying academic challenges (Carver & Connor-Smith, 2019).

The relatively higher variance explained by coping styles (18%) compared to academic stress (3%) in the present study suggests that how students respond to stress may be more important than the stress itself in determining academic engagement. In other words, students' coping mechanisms may play a more significant role in shaping their academic involvement than the presence of academic stressors alone.

## **Conclusion**

This study examined the influence of academic stress (study despondency, worry about grade, workload, self-expectation and pressure from study) and coping style (active emotional, active problem coping, passive emotional coping and passive problem coping) on academic engagement among undergraduates of the University of Ibadan. The findings revealed that academic stress variables jointly predicted academic engagement, although the magnitude of the relationship was relatively small. Specifically, the results showed that worry about grade was the only dimension of academic stress that independently predicted academic engagement. This suggests that concerns about academic performance may serve as a motivating factor that encourages students to invest effort and remain actively involved in their academic activities. In contrast, other dimensions of academic stress such as workload, study despondency, pressure from study, and self-expectation did not independently influence academic engagement. These findings indicate that not all forms of academic stress necessarily undermine students' academic involvement, particularly in highly competitive academic environments where students may perceive stress as part of the academic process.

Furthermore, the study found that coping style significantly predicted academic engagement among undergraduate students. Among the coping styles examined, active emotional coping emerged as the only significant independent predictor of academic engagement. This finding highlights the importance of students' ability to manage their emotional responses to academic challenges in maintaining sustained involvement in academic tasks. Students who

are able to regulate stress-related emotions and maintain psychological balance are more likely to demonstrate higher levels of vigor, dedication, and absorption in their academic work.

The findings of this study emphasize that while academic stress may play a role in shaping students' academic experiences, the strategies students employ to cope with academic challenges appear to have a stronger influence on their level of academic engagement. In other words, students' coping mechanisms may determine whether academic stress translates into disengagement or motivates greater involvement in academic activities. The study therefore contributes to existing literature by highlighting the importance of coping processes in understanding students' academic engagement within the context of Nigerian higher education institutions.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the findings of this study, several practical recommendations are proposed to enhance academic engagement among undergraduate students in higher education institutions.

University administrators and lecturers should implement strategies aimed at reducing excessive academic stress among students. Although academic stress is often inevitable in academic settings, institutions should ensure that academic demands such as coursework, assignments, and examinations are structured in ways that do not overwhelm students. Academic schedules should be well coordinated to minimize overlapping deadlines and excessive workload that may contribute to unnecessary stress.

Universities should strengthen academic counseling and psychological support services for students. Counseling centers can provide programs that help students develop effective coping strategies for managing academic challenges. Workshops on stress management, emotional regulation, and resilience-building can equip students with the necessary skills to cope with academic pressures and maintain engagement in their studies.

Also, lecturers should adopt teaching practices that encourage supportive learning environments. Providing constructive feedback, promoting open communication, and encouraging collaborative learning can help students feel more confident and motivated in their academic pursuits. Such supportive academic environments may also reduce students' anxiety about academic performance and improve their engagement in learning activities.

In addition, students themselves should be encouraged to develop adaptive coping strategies that enable them to manage academic stress effectively. Activities such as time management training, peer mentoring programs, and academic support groups may help students learn practical strategies for dealing with academic challenges. Encouraging students to seek social and emotional support when experiencing stress may also enhance their ability to remain engaged in academic tasks.

Finally, policymakers and university management should recognize the importance of psychological factors in shaping students' academic engagement. Institutional policies aimed at improving academic outcomes should not only focus on curriculum development and

infrastructural improvements but should also consider students' mental health and coping capacities as key determinants of academic success.

### **Limitations and Suggestions for Future Studies**

Despite the contributions of this study, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study employed a cross-sectional research design, which limits the ability to establish causal relationships among the variables examined. While the findings indicate significant associations between academic stress, coping styles, and academic engagement, the direction of causality cannot be definitively determined. Future studies may adopt longitudinal research designs to examine how these variables interact over time.

The study relied on self-report measures for data collection. Self-report instruments may be subject to response biases such as social desirability bias, where participants may provide responses they believe are socially acceptable rather than their true experiences. Future research could incorporate multiple methods of data collection, such as behavioral observations or academic performance records, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of students' academic engagement.

Also, the study was conducted among undergraduate students from a single university, the University of Ibadan. Although the university represents one of the leading higher education institutions in Nigeria, the findings may not be fully generalizable to students in other universities with different academic environments or institutional structures. Future research should therefore replicate the study across multiple universities in Nigeria and other African countries to enhance the generalizability of the findings.

Additionally, the study focused primarily on academic stress and coping styles as predictors of academic engagement. However, academic engagement is a multifaceted construct that may also be influenced by other psychological and contextual factors such as self-efficacy, social support, and learning environments. Future studies should consider incorporating these additional variables to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the determinants of academic engagement.

Finally, future research could also explore potential mediating or moderating mechanisms through which coping styles influence the relationship between academic stress and academic engagement. Investigating such mechanisms may provide deeper insights into how students manage academic challenges and how institutions can design interventions that promote sustained academic engagement among university students.

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