

Coping Strategies for Psychological Stress Among University Students: A Field Study in Algeria

استراتيجيات مواجهة الضغوط النفسية لدى طلبة الجامعة: دراسة ميدانية على عينة جزائرية

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Abstract:

This study aimed to explore the extent to which coping strategies for psychological stress are utilized by university students. The sample consisted of 120 male and female students. Using a descriptive research method, the study employed a 27-item questionnaire designed to measure stress-coping strategies across five dimensions. The results indicated that university students generally employ coping strategies for psychological stress to a high degree. The most frequently used strategies were ranked as follows: turning to religion, avoidance strategy, positive appraisal strategy, problem-solving strategy, and social support strategy. Additionally, the study revealed no statistically significant differences in students' use of coping strategies based on the academic specialization variable. However, statistically significant differences were observed based on the gender variable.

Keywords: Coping Strategies; Psychological Stress; University Students

ملخص:

هدفت هذه الدراسة إلى التعرف على مدى استخدام طلبة الجامعة لاستراتيجيات التعامل مع الضغوط النفسية. تكونت العينة من 120 طالبًا وطالبة. باستخدام المنهج الوصفي، تم توظيف استبيان مكون من 27 بندًا لقياس استراتيجيات التعامل مع الضغوط النفسية عبر خمسة أبعاد. أشارت النتائج إلى أن طلبة الجامعة يستخدمون استراتيجيات التعامل مع الضغوط النفسية بدرجة مرتفعة. تم ترتيب الاستراتيجيات الأكثر استخدامًا على النحو التالي: التوجه إلى الدين، استراتيجية التجنب، استراتيجية التقدير الإيجابي، استراتيجيات حل المشكلات، واستراتيجية الدعم الاجتماعي. كما أظهرت الدراسة عدم وجود فروق ذات دلالة إحصائية في استخدام الطلبة لاستراتيجيات التعامل تعزى إلى متغير التخصص الأكاديمي، بينما وُجدت فروق ذات دلالة إحصائية تعزى إلى متغير الجنس.

الكلمات المفتاحية: استراتيجيات التعامل؛ الضغوط النفسية؛ طلبة الجامعة.

Introduction

University students are among the most vulnerable groups to psychological stress, facing numerous challenges stemming from academic, social, and personal pressures that significantly impact their mental health and overall well-being (Mustafa et al., 2023). Psychological stress refers to the mental and emotional strain individuals experience when faced with demands that exceed their coping abilities. It arises from various sources, including work environments, social challenges, and personal health issues. These stressors are compounded by the rapid scientific and technological advancements of modern times, which, despite their benefits, have contributed to a rise in psychological burdens, earning this era the label of the "Age of Psychological Stress" (Ma, 2024).

Research highlights that young people, particularly university students, are disproportionately affected. For instance, Hamouda and Aiche (2021) noted that psychological stress significantly increased among university students due to the interplay of academic disruptions, social isolation, and personal challenges. Similarly, Sabah et al. (2021) revealed that adverse life events exacerbated family distress, further compounding students' psychological strain. These findings align with Abdel Fattah (2016), who identified youth as the primary visitors to mental health clinics, emphasizing the unique complexities of this life stage (Briki & Maouch, 2022).

During this critical period, university students navigate academic responsibilities, personal aspirations, and a growing sense of societal contribution. However, their inability to meet high expectations or fulfill academic obligations often leads to guilt, self-reproach, and increased psychological pressure. As highlighted by Nebbar and sabah (2024), targeted interventions aimed at reducing psychological burnout can effectively mitigate these pressures.

Coping strategies, as defined by Lazarus, are deliberate cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage stressful situations and reduce psychological distress (Bouaicha & Saadawi, 2013). Effective coping strategies are essential to mitigate the effects of stress and maintain psychological well-being. These strategies range from building psychological resilience, as highlighted by Benkhiat and Zerzour (2023), to utilizing techniques such as muscle relaxation,

as discussed by Lebiad (2022). Hamouda and Aiche (2021) emphasized the importance of fostering coping mechanisms tailored to students' unique challenges during periods of heightened stress. Collectively, the integration of individual and systemic approaches is crucial for managing stress and promoting mental health across different settings (Benferdi & Feddal, 2023).

This study seeks to identify the primary coping strategies employed by university students, determine differences based on academic specialization, and explore gender-based variations in coping strategies. The following hypothesis is tested: there are no statistically significant differences in the degree of students' use of coping strategies for psychological stress attributable to academic specialization or gender. By focusing on university students, who are active contributors to societal development, this research aims to shed light on an increasingly critical topic. Its findings can inform targeted interventions and programs designed to support students' mental health and foster resilience, ultimately enhancing their academic and personal success.

1. Presenting the Relevant Theoretical Literature and Defining the Terms

Psychological stress has been conceptualized in diverse ways by various scholars, each emphasizing different factors and determinants. According to Lazarus (1994), stress is defined as a set of stimuli that affect an individual, leading to specific responses, perceptions of threat, and the deployment of adaptive strategies, including psychological defenses utilized in various situations (Al-Turairee, 1994, p. 10). Al-Rashidi (2016) views stress as a feeling of pressure arising from environmental factors that impede an individual's ability to achieve goals. Stress, in this context, represents demands that surpass the individual's capacity to cope (Walaa, 2016, p. 15). Al-Qasabi (2014) conceptualizes stress as the obstacles, difficulties, and significant life events that exceed an individual's tolerance, rendering them incapable of finding suitable solutions. This often leads to psychological and physical strain, which may result in health complications (Belkasem & Chetouane, 2016, p. 118).

Further, Lazarus and Cohen (1977) make a distinction between two types of stress: external and internal. External stressors refer to events and circumstances within an individual's environment, ranging from minor incidents to acute crises. In contrast, internal stressors are personal stressors arising from the individual's perception and cognitive orientation toward external events. These are influenced by their thoughts and personality (Al-Ghareer & Abu Asaad, 2009, p. 29).

Defining Coping Strategies for Psychological Stress

Coping strategies, as a psychological concept, have been defined in varied ways within the literature. Karim and Zwaq (2020) describe coping strategies as the efforts made by individuals to alleviate tension and create new conditions for managing situations encountered throughout different stages of life (Karim & Zwaq, 2020, p. 31). Meqdad and Al-Mutawa (2004) define these strategies as the responses exhibited by an individual or group when faced with distressing or painful situations (Khalifa, 2012, p. 181).

Lazarus and Folkman (1984) provide a broader definition, describing coping strategies as attempts by individuals to avoid or manage stress (Zuhare et al., 2016, p. 2). Meanwhile, Mansouri (2017) conceptualizes coping strategies as a set of responses and reactions through which individuals adjust their behavior and psychological state to their external environment. These adjustments aim to achieve harmony, satisfy personal needs, and address environmental demands (Mansouri, 2017, p. 132).

This range of perspectives highlights the multifaceted nature of both stress and coping, underscoring the importance of individual perceptions and contextual factors in shaping how stress is experienced and managed.

2- Presenting , critiquing and analyzing Previous previous studies

Numerous studies have explored coping strategies for psychological stress, offering a diverse range of insights into this critical topic.

A study conducted by Montaser et al. (2021) investigated the coping strategies employed by underachieving gifted students to manage psychological stress and examined whether these strategies varied by gender and grade level. The researchers applied the Stress Coping Strategies Scale to a sample of 43 students. The findings revealed that seeking emotional support was the most frequently used strategy, followed by behavioral withdrawal, while positive reappraisal ranked as the least utilized strategy. Moreover, the study found no significant gender-based differences in most coping strategies.

Al-Tayebi and Zenbou (2020) explored the relationship between the dimensions of psychological resilience and coping strategies for stress among first-year social sciences students. Their study also considered gender and student classification variables. A sample of 92 students completed the Psychological Resilience Scale and the Stress Coping Strategies Scale. Employing a descriptive approach, the researchers concluded that there were no significant differences in the use of coping strategies across the sample.

Karim and Zwaq (2020) examined psychological stress and coping strategies among a sample of 60 teachers. The findings indicated no statistically significant differences in levels of psychological stress based on gender or marital status variables.

Lemimishi (2018) assessed coping strategies for psychological stress among students preparing for their baccalaureate exams. Using a descriptive exploratory approach, the study applied the Coping Strategies Scale to a sample of 60 students. The results revealed a high overall level of coping strategies among the participants, with no significant differences in coping strategy scores based on gender or academic stream.

Ghazi (2013) investigated the relationship between coping strategies for psychological stress and parental treatment methods among adolescents in Damascus. The study sample comprised 635 students and employed a descriptive-analytical method, utilizing scales for sources of stress, coping strategies, and parental upbringing methods. The findings indicated that problem-solving planning was the most commonly employed strategy. Additionally, significant differences in coping strategy scores were observed based on gender, favoring males, and academic specialization, with scientific stream students showing a greater preference for group support and positive thinking strategies compared to their literary counterparts.

The review of theoretical frameworks and empirical studies underscores the importance of understanding coping strategies employed by university students in managing psychological stress. Identifying the factors that influence these strategies, such as academic specialization and gender, provides a foundation for designing targeted interventions aimed at enhancing resilience and fostering mental well-being within academic settings. This study aims to address gaps in the existing literature and offers practical recommendations for supporting university students during this critical stage of personal and academic development.

3-Methodology:

Study Methodology

The descriptive approach was employed for this study, as it aligns with the research objectives and facilitates the exploration of coping strategies used by university students to manage psychological stress.

Study Sample

The study sample consisted of 120 university students (male and female) who were selected through convenience sampling from the University of Moulay Tahar Saida.

Study Instrument

The study employed a questionnaire developed based on previous research, including studies by Al-Tayebi and Zenbou (2020), Karim and Zwaq (2020), Lemimishi (2018), and Ghazi (2013). The questionnaire contained 27 items distributed across five dimensions: Problem-Solving Strategy (6 items), Avoidance Strategy (5 items), Social Support Strategy (5 items), Positive Appraisal Strategy (6 items), and Religious Coping Strategy (5 items). Participants responded using a five-point Likert scale ranging from "Very High" (5) to "Very Low" (1).

The questionnaire's validity was confirmed through expert review, with item-dimension correlation coefficients ranging from 0.59 to 0.75, all statistically significant at $p < 0.01$. Construct validity was established by aligning the results with theoretical predictions. Reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, yielding the following results for each dimension: Problem-Solving Strategy (0.76), Avoidance Strategy (0.39), Social Support Strategy (0.75), Positive Appraisal Strategy (0.58), and Religious Coping Strategy (0.87). The overall reliability score for the entire questionnaire was 0.87, indicating high internal consistency.

Statistical Analysis

Data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. Descriptive statistics, including means, standard deviations, and weighted averages, were employed to determine the level of coping strategies used by students and to identify the most and least commonly used strategies. Additionally, an independent samples t-test was conducted to examine differences in the use of coping strategies between two groups. The t-test compared the arithmetic means and standard deviations of the groups across the various dimensions of coping strategies, assessing whether these differences were statistically significant. The results provided insights into how students' coping strategies varied based on specific demographic or contextual factors.

4.- Results

Results for the General Question:

What is the level of students' use of coping strategies for psychological stress, and which strategies are most commonly used?

To address this question, the means, standard deviations, and levels were calculated for each dimension of the questionnaire. The results are summarized in Table 01 below:

Table 01: Means, Standard Deviations, and Levels of the Dimensions of the Coping Strategies for Psychological Stress Questionnaire

Dimension	Mean	Standard Deviation	Level
Problem-Solving Strategy	20.15	4.470	Moderate
Avoidance Strategy	18.12	3.704	High
Social Support Strategy	15.90	4.279	Moderate
Positive Evaluation Strategy	21.27	4.379	High
Resorting to Religion	21.40	4.267	Very High
Total Score	96.83	14.779	High

It is evident from the table above that the **highest average** was for the **Resorting to Religion Strategy** ($M = 21.40$, $SD = 4.267$), indicating that university students rely significantly on this strategy to cope with psychological stress.

This is followed by the **Positive Evaluation Strategy** ($M = 21.27$, $SD = 4.379$), which reflects the students' tendency to positively assess stressful situations as a coping mechanism.

The **Avoidance Strategy** ranked third ($M = 18.12$, $SD = 3.704$), suggesting a relatively high level of use among students to manage stress through avoidance.

The **Problem-Solving Strategy** came next ($M = 20.15$, $SD = 4.470$), with a moderate level of utilization, indicating students' attempt to directly address and resolve stressors.

Finally, the **Social Support Strategy** ranked last ($M = 15.90$, $SD = 4.279$), with a moderate level, suggesting that students are less likely to rely on seeking support from others when compared to other strategies.

Overall, the total score ($M = 96.83$, $SD = 14.779$) indicates that university students use a variety of coping strategies, with a general tendency towards a **high level of coping**. This demonstrates the diversity in their approaches to managing psychological stress, with a clear preference for religion-based and positive evaluation strategies.

Results of the First Sub-Hypothesis

The first sub-hypothesis states: "**There are no statistically significant differences in the degree of students' use of stress-coping strategies based on their field of study.**"

To test this hypothesis, an independent samples t-test was conducted. The results are summarized in **Table 2** below:

Table 2: T-test Results for Differences in the Use of Stress-Coping Strategies Based on Field of Study

Strategy	Field of Study	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	df	t-value	p-value
Problem-Solving Strategy	Social Sciences	62	20.39	3.977	118	0.599	0.550
	Humanities	58	19.90	4.965			
Avoidance Strategy	Social Sciences	62	18.10	3.679	118	-0.061	0.952
	Humanities	58	18.14	3.762			
Social Support Strategy	Social Sciences	62	16.21	4.216	118	0.819	0.415
	Humanities	58	15.57	3.357			
Positive Evaluation Strategy	Social Sciences	62	20.79	3.988	118	-1.235	0.219
	Humanities	58	21.68	4.759			

Strategy	Field of Study	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	df	t-value	p-value
Religion-Based Coping Strategy	Social Sciences	62	21.58	4.210	118	0.478	0.634
	Humanities	58	21.21	4.356			
Overall Score	Social Sciences	62	97.06	13.952	118	0.176	0.860
	Humanities	58	96.59	12.734			

From **Table 2**, it is evident that there are no statistically significant differences in the use of stress-coping strategies between students from the Social Sciences and Humanities fields, either at the overall scale or the subdimension levels.

- The **overall mean scores** for Social Sciences ($M = 97.06$) and Humanities ($M = 96.59$) are very close, with no significant difference ($t = 0.176$, $p = 0.860$).
- Similarly, the subdimensions, including Problem-Solving, Avoidance, Social Support, Positive Evaluation, and Religion-Based Coping strategies, also show no significant differences.

This lack of difference suggests that coping strategies for psychological stress are utilized similarly by students regardless of their field of study, potentially reflecting common stressors and coping resources across disciplines.

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The analysis in **Table 2** shows no statistically significant differences in the use of stress-coping strategies between students from the Social Sciences and Humanities fields:

1. **Overall Score:** The mean score for Social Sciences ($M = 97.06$) and Humanities ($M = 96.59$) is nearly identical, with no significant difference ($t = 0.176$, $p = 0.860$).
2. **Subdimensions:** No significant differences were observed in the following strategies:
 - **Problem-Solving Strategy** ($t = 0.599$, $p = 0.550$)
 - **Avoidance Strategy** ($t = -0.061$, $p = 0.952$)
 - **Social Support Strategy** ($t = 0.819$, $p = 0.415$)
 - **Positive Evaluation Strategy** ($t = -1.235$, $p = 0.219$)

- **Religion-Based Coping Strategy** ($t = 0.478$, $p = 0.634$)

These findings suggest that students from both academic fields employ similar coping strategies to manage psychological stress.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study highlight critical patterns in coping strategies among Algerian university students, offering insights that align with and diverge from existing literature. The predominant use of religious coping ($M = 21.40$) underscores the cultural and spiritual context of Algeria, where religious faith serves as a cornerstone for managing stress. This aligns with studies in similar sociocultural settings, such as Mustafa et al. (2023), who identified religion as a primary coping mechanism in Muslim-majority countries, and Benkhiat and Zerzour (2023), who emphasized the role of spirituality in fostering resilience. The high reliance on avoidance strategies ($M = 18.12$) mirrors Ghazi's (2013) findings, suggesting that students may prioritize temporary relief from stressors over long-term solutions, particularly in environments with limited mental health resources. Conversely, the relatively low use of social support ($M = 15.90$) contrasts with Hatunoglu's (2020) research in Turkey, where peer and familial networks were central to stress management. This discrepancy may reflect cultural hesitancy in Algeria to seek external help due to stigma or perceived self-reliance, a theme echoed in Sabah et al.'s (2021) work on familial dynamics during crises.

The absence of significant differences in coping strategies between academic specializations aligns with Lemimishi's (2018) conclusions, which attributed such homogeneity to universal academic stressors (e.g., exams, workload) transcending disciplinary boundaries. However, this contrasts with Ghazi (2013), who noted discipline-specific variations, possibly due to differing curricular demands or career pressures. The uniformity observed here may also stem from shared institutional environments or cultural norms that standardize coping behaviors across fields.

Gender-based differences in coping strategies resonate with prior research. For instance, Ghazi (2013) and Sabah et al. (2021) found that gendered socialization influences coping preferences, with women often leaning toward emotionally adaptive strategies (e.g., positive appraisal) and men toward avoidance. Stallman et al. (2020) similarly noted that societal expectations shape

gendered coping behaviors, with men less likely to seek social support due to norms of self-sufficiency. These dynamics suggest that interventions must account for sociocultural constructs of gender to effectively address stress management.

Methodologically, the reliance on self-reported data introduces potential biases, such as overreporting socially desirable strategies (e.g., religious coping) or underreporting stigmatized ones (e.g., avoidance). The sample's limitation to a single university further restricts generalizability, as regional or institutional factors may uniquely shape coping behaviors. Future studies could adopt longitudinal designs to assess coping efficacy over time, incorporate mixed methods to explore cultural nuances, and expand samples to diverse universities and demographic groups.

Practically, the findings advocate for university-led initiatives such as workshops to enhance problem-solving skills, gender-sensitive counseling services, and peer support networks to mitigate reliance on avoidance. Integrating religious coping into mental health programs could also align interventions with cultural values, fostering greater student engagement. By addressing both individual and systemic factors, universities can cultivate environments that promote adaptive coping and resilience, ultimately supporting academic and personal success.

6-Conclusion

The current study aimed to explore the degree to which students use coping strategies, identify the most commonly employed strategy for managing psychological stress, and examine differences based on gender and field of study. The findings revealed a high use of coping strategies among participants, with religion-based coping ranking first, followed by avoidance, positive evaluation, problem-solving, and social support strategies. While no statistically significant differences were found in the use of coping strategies based on the field of study, significant differences emerged based on gender. Given the limitations in generalizing these results, future studies should include diverse samples and examine additional influencing variables. Based on the findings, it is recommended to expand academic research on coping strategies across various fields of study, organize lectures and training sessions on stress management and coping mechanisms, and develop counseling programs to reduce stress and promote positive coping strategies among students.

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