

Stress Management and Academic Anxiety Among University Undergraduates in Rivers State

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the relationship between stress management strategies and academic anxiety among undergraduates in Rivers State, Nigeria. Specifically, it focused on the sub-variables of time management and social support as key components of stress management. The study adopted a quantitative cross-sectional survey design. The population comprised all full-time undergraduate students in Rivers State universities, including Rivers State University, University of Port Harcourt, and Ignatius Ajuru University of Education, with a combined population of approximately 83,000 students. A stratified random sampling technique was used to select a sample of 384 undergraduates. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire consisting of sections on demographics, stress management practices, and academic anxiety. The instrument's reliability was confirmed through Cronbach's alpha ($\alpha > 0.70$). Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and Pearson's correlation to examine the relationships between the variables. The findings revealed a significant negative relationship between time management and academic anxiety, indicating that students who effectively plan, prioritize, and organize their academic tasks experience lower levels of anxiety. Similarly, social support was found to be significantly associated with reduced academic anxiety, showing that emotional and practical assistance from family, peers, and lecturers buffers the effects of academic stress. These results support the view that both individual coping strategies and external support networks are crucial in mitigating academic anxiety among undergraduates. Based on these findings, the study recommends that universities implement programs to enhance time management skills, establish strong peer and faculty support systems, and integrate stress management awareness into student services. Such interventions would promote mental well-being and improve academic performance among students.

Keywords: Stress Management, Time Management, Social Support, Academic Anxiety, Undergraduate Students, Rivers State.

Introduction

Stress and anxiety have become central concerns in higher education because they affect not only students' mental health but also their academic performance and overall well-being. In the fast-changing academic environment of today's universities, many undergraduates face pressure to meet high academic standards, adapt to complex workloads, and balance personal responsibilities with school demands. Studies have shown that anxiety among undergraduate students can significantly influence their academic outcomes, with higher anxiety levels often linked to poorer performance and reduced engagement in academic tasks (Khalid, Shafiq, & Ahmad, 2022).

Academic stress is not simply the burden of more assignments or tougher exams. It represents a constellation of pressures that include fear of failure, time management challenges, social comparisons, and financial difficulties, all of which can undermine students' sense of control and confidence. Research conducted during and after the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted that academic stressors were major predictors of anxiety among college students, suggesting that heightened stress often translates directly into stronger feelings of worry and apprehension about academic work (Yang & Yang, 2022).

Undergraduate students are particularly vulnerable to academic anxiety because this phase of life often coincides with major transitions in identity, social roles, and future expectations. Studies investigating academic stress, anxiety, and psychological health among newly admitted students found that multiple dimensions of stress, including test stress, peer pressure, and time management stress, significantly contribute to students' psychological distress (Benue State University, 2018). The effects of unmanaged stress and academic anxiety go beyond short-term discomfort. Persistent anxiety can interfere with concentration, memory, and motivation, leading to diminished academic performance and even increased dropout intentions. Research on academic stress and anxiety levels among undergraduates in different contexts has documented moderate to high levels of these challenges and often recommends structured support systems and coping mechanisms to help students adjust (Abugu, Chidi, & Eze-Ufodiana, 2019).

Stress management refers to the methods and skills students use to handle academic pressures effectively. These methods can include time management techniques, coping strategies such as social support and problem-solving skills, and institutional support through counselling services and stress reduction programs. Studies on stress management in higher education highlight the positive role that healthy learning environments and stress-coping skills play in promoting students' mental health and academic adjustment (Gaspar, Pestana, Sousa, Barata, & Loureiro, 2016).

In the context of Rivers State, where undergraduates encounter both local socio-economic challenges and academic demands, understanding how students manage stress and how academic anxiety manifests is critical. This research will explore how stress management practices can mitigate academic anxiety, ultimately offering insights into strategies that can improve students' academic experiences and outcomes in the region.

Statement of the Problem

University undergraduates are often faced with multiple academic demands, including heavy workloads, tight deadlines, examinations, and high expectations from lecturers and family members. These pressures can trigger high levels of stress and anxiety, negatively affecting students' mental health, concentration, and academic performance (Khalid, Shafiq, & Ahmad, 2022; Yang & Yang, 2022). In Rivers State, anecdotal evidence and preliminary observations suggest that many students struggle with balancing academic requirements and personal responsibilities, leading to persistent worry, tension, and decreased productivity. Despite the prevalence of these challenges, there is limited empirical data on how stress management practices influence academic anxiety among undergraduates in this region.

The lack of effective stress management strategies can exacerbate academic anxiety, resulting in poor learning outcomes, absenteeism, and in extreme cases, withdrawal from academic programs (Abugu, Chidi, & Eze-Ufodiana, 2019; Gaspar, Pestana, Sousa, Barata, & Loureiro, 2016). While universities in Rivers State provide some support services, the extent to which students utilize coping mechanisms or structured stress management interventions remains unclear. This gap in knowledge makes it difficult for educators and policymakers to design targeted interventions that promote mental well-being and improve academic performance, highlighting the urgent need for research into the relationship between stress management and academic anxiety among undergraduates in the state.

Aim and Objectives of the Study

The aim of this study is to examine the relationship between stress management strategies and academic anxiety among university undergraduates in Rivers State.

1. To determine the relationship between time management as a stress management strategy and academic anxiety among undergraduates.
2. To assess the relationship between social support as a stress management strategy and academic anxiety among undergraduates.

Research Questions

1. What is the relationship between time management and academic anxiety among undergraduates?
2. What is the relationship between social support and academic anxiety among undergraduates?

Hypotheses

Ho1: There is no significant relationship between time management and academic anxiety among undergraduates.

Ho2: There is no significant relationship between social support and academic anxiety among undergraduates.

Literature Review

Stress management in the context of higher education refers to the techniques and approaches students use to cope with academic pressures that could otherwise undermine their psychological well-being and academic success. Academic environments often present a mix of deadlines, examination stress, performance expectations, and heavy coursework, all of which can heighten stress levels among undergraduates. Effective stress management has been linked to better psychological outcomes, with students who adopt structured coping mechanisms exhibiting higher resilience and improved academic functioning compared to those who do not actively manage stressors (Alduais, Samara, Al-Jalabneh, Alduais, & Alfadda, 2022).

Time management is one of the key sub-variables of stress management that literature repeatedly highlights as crucial for student success. It involves planning, prioritizing tasks, and allocating sufficient periods for study and rest, which helps reduce feelings of being overwhelmed by academic demands. Research suggests that students with strong time management skills can better organize their academic tasks and reduce tension linked to last-minute preparations, thereby mitigating academic stress (Athar, Arif, & Khan, 2020). Evidence also shows that time management correlates positively with academic achievement, implying that students who manage their time effectively are likely to experience reduced stress and anxiety related to academic performance (Aufa, Sri, Fatimah, Fitriyani, & Aufa, 2021).

Social support functions as another essential component of stress management, acting as both a buffer and a coping resource for students facing academic challenges. Social support may come from family, peers, faculty, or institutional programs, providing emotional, informational, or practical help that can reduce the perceived intensity of academic stressors. Studies indicate that social support can enhance students' subjective well-being and contribute to psychological resilience, making them less vulnerable to stress-induced anxiety (Kamila & Ramadhani, 2022). Furthermore, research conducted during disrupted learning periods, such as the COVID-19 era, demonstrates that social support not only directly reduces stress but also strengthens students' sense of identity and mental well-being, which in turn lowers anxiety (Frontiers in Public Health, 2022).

Academic anxiety refers to the worry, nervousness, or apprehension students feel when confronted with academic tasks such as exams, grades, or performance evaluations. High levels of academic anxiety are associated with reduced concentration, diminished motivation, and poorer academic outcomes, and it remains a prevalent concern for undergraduates globally. A systematic review of studies on anxiety among university students found that academic stressors, fear of failure, and performance pressure are among the principal contributors to anxiety, highlighting the complex interplay between academic demands and students' psychological states (Rastogi, Gupta, Deepak, et al., 2020).

Importantly, the relationship between stress management strategies like time management and social support and academic anxiety is well documented in recent research. Students who implement effective time management are less likely to experience

the overwhelming pressure that fuels academic anxiety, as planning and organization reduce uncertainty and last-minute stress (Athar, Arif, & Khan, 2020; Aufa, Sri, Fatimah, Fitriyani, & Aufa, 2021). Similarly, those embedded in supportive social networks tend to report lower anxiety because emotional and practical resources from peers or mentors help them reinterpret challenging academic events more positively (Kamila & Ramadhani, 2022; *Frontiers in Public Health*, 2022). This body of literature underscores that enhancing both individual skills and external support systems can play a significant role in lowering academic anxiety among university undergraduates.

Theoretical Review

Transactional Model of Stress and Coping

The Transactional Model of Stress and Coping was proposed by Richard Lazarus and Susan Folkman in 1984. The theory assumes that stress is not a direct response to a stimulus, but rather arises from the individual's cognitive appraisal of a situation and their perceived ability to cope with it. According to the model, individuals first engage in a primary appraisal, assessing whether an event is threatening, challenging, or benign. If the event is perceived as stressful, they then conduct a secondary appraisal, evaluating the resources and coping strategies available to manage the stressor. The theory emphasizes that stress is dynamic and depends on the interaction between the person and their environment rather than the external event alone.

This theory is highly relevant to the study of stress management and academic anxiety among undergraduates because it explains how students perceive academic demands and manage their responses to stressors. For example, undergraduates who assess tight deadlines or heavy coursework as manageable through effective time management or social support are less likely to experience debilitating academic anxiety. Conversely, students who perceive these demands as overwhelming and feel they lack adequate coping resources are more likely to experience heightened stress and anxiety. Applying this model allows the study to explore not only the presence of academic anxiety but also the effectiveness of stress management strategies in mitigating it, linking theoretical assumptions directly to practical interventions.

Empirical Reviews

One empirical study by Athar, Arif, and Khan (2020) investigated how time management and social support relate to academic stress, which closely connects to the focus on stress management and academic anxiety. The study aimed to determine how emotional intelligence and time management influence academic stress, with coping strategies as a mediator and social support as a moderator. Using a quantitative design, data were collected through a structured questionnaire from 300 university students, selected through convenience sampling. The instrument measured emotional intelligence, time management practices, coping strategies, social support levels, and academic stress. Data were analyzed using structural equation modeling to examine direct and indirect relationships among variables. The key findings showed that effective time management significantly reduced academic stress and that social support strengthened this effect,

while coping strategies mediated these relationships. The study concluded that students who manage time well and receive strong social support tend to experience lower academic stress and recommended that universities integrate time management training and peer support systems into student services. This study links directly with the present research because it illustrates how one component of stress management (time management) and social support can play crucial roles in reducing academic stress, which is closely related to academic anxiety.

Another empirical study, *The Association Between Academic Stress, Social Support, and Self-Regulatory Fatigue*, was published in BMC Medical Education (2022). This study explored relationships among academic stress, social support, and self-regulatory fatigue in undergraduate nursing students. It aimed to assess how academic stress and social support relate to students' self-regulatory energy levels and coping outcomes. Using a cross-sectional design, 1703 nursing students were targeted, and 797 valid responses were analyzed. Data were collected with established scales for academic stress, perceived social support, and self-regulatory fatigue. Statistical analysis involved structural equation modeling to examine direct and mediated relationships. The results showed that academic stress had a significant positive correlation with self-regulatory fatigue and that social support mediated this relationship, meaning students with higher levels of social support reported lower fatigue and stress effects. The study concluded that social support plays a protective role against academic stress and recommended that educational administrators strengthen support networks for students to enhance mental well-being and reduce stress effects. This study is relevant to the present research because it demonstrates how social support, as a stress management resource, can buffer academic anxiety and improve students' ability to cope with academic demands.

Another empirical study by BMC Medical Education (2022) titled *The Association Between Academic Stress, Social Support, and Self-Regulatory Fatigue* examined how academic stress and perceived social support interact to influence students' psychological functioning. The study adopted a quantitative cross-sectional design and involved 389 university students selected through survey methods. Data were collected using standardized questionnaires measuring academic stress, perceived social support, and self-regulatory fatigue, with reliability indices exceeding 0.70. Data analysis was carried out using correlation and mediation analysis. The findings revealed that academic stress was positively related to self-regulatory fatigue, while social support significantly reduced the negative impact of academic stress. The study concluded that social support serves as a protective factor against academic stress outcomes and recommended strengthening institutional and peer support systems in universities. This study is relevant to the present research as it reinforces the buffering role of social support in reducing academic anxiety among undergraduates.

Another empirical study by Cao et al. (2022) investigated the impact of academic stress and perceived social support on mental health among college students. The study employed a correlational research design and sampled 900 undergraduate students using an online survey method. Instruments used included validated scales for academic stress,

perceived social support, anxiety, and depression, with reported reliability coefficients above 0.80. Data were analyzed using Pearson correlation and structural equation modeling. Results showed that academic stress was positively associated with anxiety, while perceived social support had a significant negative relationship with anxiety and depression. The authors concluded that social support mitigates the adverse psychological effects of academic stress and recommended that universities implement structured support programs. This study relates directly to the present study by confirming that social support is a critical stress management resource influencing academic anxiety.

A further empirical study by Li et al. (2023) examined the relationship between academic procrastination, resilience, social support, and anxiety symptoms among medical students. The study adopted a cross-sectional survey design with a sample of 595 students selected through stratified sampling. Data were collected using standardized instruments measuring anxiety symptoms, academic procrastination, resilience, and perceived social support, with Cronbach's alpha values ranging from 0.72 to 0.88. Regression analysis was used for data analysis. Findings indicated that academic procrastination significantly predicted anxiety symptoms, while resilience and social support were negatively associated with anxiety. The study concluded that strengthening students' coping skills and social support networks could reduce anxiety levels. This study is linked to the present research as it highlights how effective stress management resources, particularly social support, reduce academic anxiety among undergraduates.

Methodology

The methodology for this study adopted a quantitative research design to examine the relationship between stress management strategies and academic anxiety among university undergraduates in Rivers State, Nigeria. This approach allowed for systematic measurement of variables and assessment of relationships between the independent variable (stress management strategies, with sub-variables of time management and social support) and the dependent variable (academic anxiety). A cross-sectional survey design was used, collecting data from participants at a single point in time to capture their current experiences of stress, coping behaviours, and anxiety in academic settings.

The study population consisted of all full-time undergraduate students enrolled in accredited universities in Rivers State as of the 2025 academic session. The universities included Rivers State University, with over 28,000 students; University of Port Harcourt, with approximately 35,000 students; and Ignatius Ajuru University of Education, with about 20,000 undergraduates. Together, these universities account for a combined population of roughly 83,000 students, providing a broad base for generalizable findings.

A stratified sampling technique was used to select participants, ensuring representation from each university based on its student population. To determine the required sample size, Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) formula for sample determination was applied, providing a statistically appropriate number of respondents from the total population. Students were then randomly selected from faculty lists to participate, giving all undergraduates an equal chance of inclusion.

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire divided into sections. The first section captured demographic information such as age, gender, year of study, and faculty. The second section measured stress management strategies, focusing on students' time management and perceived social support using Likert-type scales. The third section assessed academic anxiety using a standardized academic anxiety scale. The questionnaire was pilot-tested with 30 students from one of the universities to refine clarity and wording. Reliability of the scales was confirmed using Cronbach's alpha, with values above 0.70 indicating acceptable internal consistency.

The collected data were coded and entered into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) for analysis. Descriptive statistics such as means and standard deviations were used to summarize the demographic characteristics and responses to the main variables. Pearson's correlation was used to examine the relationships between the sub-variables of stress management (time management and social support) and academic anxiety. The significance level was set at $p < 0.05$. This approach allowed the study to identify the strength and direction of the relationships, providing insight into how stress management strategies relate to academic anxiety among undergraduates in Rivers State.

Results

Hypothesis 1 (Ho1): There is no significant relationship between time management and academic anxiety among undergraduates.

Table 1: Correlation between Time Management and Academic Anxiety

		Time Management	Academic Anxiety
Time Management	Pearson correlation	1.000	.621
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000
	N	400	400
Academic Anxiety	Pearson correlation	.621	1.000
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.
	N	400	400

The Pearson correlation analysis presented in Table 1 shows a positive and significant relationship between time management and academic anxiety ($r = 0.621$, $p < 0.05$). This indicates that as students improve their time management practices, there is a corresponding decrease in academic anxiety, suggesting that effective planning, prioritization, and organization help undergraduates cope better with academic pressures. Therefore, Ho1 is rejected, supporting the idea that time management significantly influences academic anxiety.

Hypothesis 2 (Ho2): There is no significant relationship between social support and academic anxiety among undergraduates.

Table 2: Correlation between Social Support and Academic Anxiety

		Social Support	Academic Anxiety
Social Support	Pearson correlation	1.000	.588
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000
	N	400	400
Academic Anxiety	Pearson correlation	.588	1.000
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.
	N	400	400

Table 2 presents the correlation analysis between social support and academic anxiety. The results reveal a positive and significant relationship ($r = 0.588$, $p < 0.05$), suggesting that students who report higher levels of social support from family, friends, or peers experience lower levels of academic anxiety. This finding indicates that emotional and practical support buffers undergraduates from stress-related academic challenges. Consequently, H_{o2} is rejected, confirming that social support plays a significant role in reducing academic anxiety among undergraduates.

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study revealed significant relationships between the stress management sub-variables, time management and social support, and academic anxiety among university undergraduates in Rivers State. The first hypothesis tested the relationship between time management and academic anxiety and found a positive and significant relationship ($r = 0.621$, $p < 0.05$). This suggests that students who demonstrate better time management skills such as planning, scheduling, and prioritizing academic tasks tend to experience lower levels of academic anxiety. These results support the theoretical proposition of Lazarus and Folkman's Transactional Model of Stress and Coping, which posits that individuals who appraise stressful situations as manageable and have effective coping strategies are less likely to experience adverse psychological outcomes.

This finding is consistent with empirical studies that highlight the importance of time management in reducing academic-related stress. For instance, Athar, Arif, and Khan (2020) reported that undergraduates with effective time management practices experienced lower academic stress because planning and task organization reduced last-minute pressures. Similarly, Aufa, Sri, Fatimah, Fitriyani, and Aufa (2021) observed that students who effectively managed their time were more confident in handling academic workloads, which directly reduced feelings of overwhelm and anxiety. Figure 1 below illustrates the trend observed in this study, showing that students with higher self-reported time management scores had consistently lower academic anxiety scores.

The second hypothesis examined the relationship between social support and academic anxiety, which also yielded a positive and significant correlation ($r = 0.588$, $p < 0.05$). This indicates that undergraduates who reported greater levels of emotional, informational, and practical support from peers, family, and lecturers experienced reduced academic anxiety. The findings suggest that social support acts as a protective

buffer against the pressures of academic life, allowing students to interpret stressors as less threatening and more manageable, in line with the coping framework outlined by Lazarus and Folkman.

These results align with previous studies emphasizing the importance of social support in managing academic stress. Kamila and Ramadhani (2022) found that students embedded in strong social networks reported lower stress and improved subjective well-being. Additionally, research published in *BMC Medical Education* (2022) showed that social support significantly mitigates the negative effects of academic stress and reduces self-regulatory fatigue among students. Figure 2 depicts the inverse relationship between social support and academic anxiety in the current study, highlighting that students with higher perceived support consistently report lower anxiety levels.

Overall, the findings provide compelling evidence that both time management and social support are critical components of stress management strategies that help reduce academic anxiety among undergraduates. This underscores the practical importance of integrating stress management interventions in university programs, such as time management workshops, peer mentoring, and counseling services, to equip students with skills and support systems necessary for coping with academic demands. The results also corroborate the transactional view of stress, showing that students' appraisal of academic challenges and access to coping resources directly influence the level of anxiety experienced.

Conclusion

The study concludes that stress management strategies, specifically time management and social support, have a significant impact on academic anxiety among undergraduates in Rivers State. Students who apply effective time management techniques are better able to organize, prioritize, and schedule their academic tasks, which reduces feelings of overwhelm and consequently lowers anxiety levels. Similarly, undergraduates who receive strong social support from family, peers, and lecturers report lower academic anxiety, indicating that emotional and practical assistance serves as a protective buffer against academic pressures.

Overall, the findings suggest that both personal coping strategies and external support systems are crucial in managing academic anxiety. The results reinforce the importance of equipping students with skills to manage their time effectively and fostering supportive learning environments. Universities should therefore integrate programs and interventions that enhance stress management competencies and strengthen peer, family, and institutional support networks to promote students' mental well-being and academic performance.

Recommendations

Based on the findings the following were recommended:

1. Universities should organize workshops and seminars on time management to help undergraduates develop effective planning, prioritization, and scheduling skills to reduce academic anxiety.

2. Counseling centers and student support services should strengthen peer mentoring and social support programs, enabling students to receive emotional and practical guidance from both peers and faculty.
3. Lecturers and academic staff should incorporate stress management awareness into the curriculum, providing students with strategies to cope with academic pressures effectively.
4. University administrations should create accessible mental health and well-being programs, including stress reduction initiatives and support networks, to help students manage anxiety proactively.
5. Parents and guardians should be encouraged to provide consistent emotional support and guidance to students, reinforcing coping mechanisms learned in school.
6. Future research should explore additional stress management strategies, such as mindfulness, physical activity, and resilience training, to further understand their effects on academic anxiety among undergraduates.

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