HOW STRESS AFFECTS ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE OF HUMAN KINETICS AND SPORTS SCIENCE STUDENTS, UNIVERSITY OF BENIN

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Abstract

This study investigates how stress affects the academic performance of undergraduates at University of Benin. The study population was 350 undergraduates. Data were collected using simple random technique and a sample size of 175 undergraduates was selected for the study

The research instrument was an adapted Academic Stress Scale (ASS) questionnaire. The validity of the instrument was subjected to scrutiny and Cronbach alpha statistics were used to determine the reliability of the instrument (an *r*-value of 0.79 was obtained). Data were analysed using percentages, Pearson correlation, and means. The results revealed that the majority of undergraduates experienced high stress levels; there was a weak negative relationship between academic performance and stress. Stress is not affecting academic performance significantly; students agreed that they faced stress such as academic, time/balance, intrapersonal/self and relationship/social, but adopted strategies that enabled them cope with stress.

In conclusion, students must set priorities and use their resources to avoid stressful situations. Recommendations were made that stress intervention programs be designed to address stress in university students. Coping strategies that help students to deal with their own thoughts and feelings can be facilitated by accessible professional and peer counselling, student support groups, and adequate course advising.

Keywords: *Academic performance; Human kinetics students; Stress; Stressors; Undergraduates*

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

INTRODUCTION

In Nigeria, education is an instrument that can affect national development. Education not only provides knowledge and skills, but also inculcates values, and fosters the right attitude and habits. Formal education takes place in schools, and schools are nothing without students. Students are an essential asset for any educational institute (Ukeje, 2010). According to Ogwa (2012), the social and economic development of any nation is directly linked with students' academic performance. Student performance plays an important role in producing high quality graduates who will become great leaders and provide manpower for the country – and this in turn is responsible for the country's economic and social development (Ukeje, 2010).

Studies by Ogwa (2012) on tertiary education have revealed that universities are an important part of the educational system. However, the main challenge for universities seems to be the academic per-

formance of students. Academic performance is becoming worrisome and represents a matter of grave concern to many educationists (Aremu, 2000). Students have to overcome many obstacles to achieve optimal academic performance (Arisi, 2008). Therefore, the measurement of student academic performance has received considerable attention in previous research.

Academic performance of students at universities has been associated with underlying problems, one of which is student stress (Arisi, 2008). An enabling environment is required for undergraduate students to achieve optimal academic performance. Parents are required to place top priority on housing, food, clothing, health care, and academic needs of their wards; so as to better their academic performance. However, educational logs and books may appear to be luxuries, and parents may not have the time, resources, energy, or knowledge to fund innovative and less-expensive ways to foster student development. Families with lower socio-economic status often lack the financial, social, and educational support that characterizes families with high socio-economic status. Lower income families have inadequate or limited access to community resources that promote and support children's development (Eresimadu, 2008).

Bloisi et al. (2007) define stress as "the body's psychological, emotional, and physiological responses to any demand which is perceived as threatening to a person's well-being". It has been cited that stress leads to both positive and negative responses, because our rational evaluation and assumption of the stressors makes a difference in how we react to the issue that is perceived a stressor and how we deal with it. There is constructive as well as destructive stress. Constructive stress is the feeling of anxiety which makes us perform well in our daily life. Stress can also be defined as the driving force that tests and encourages us to do something, whereas destructive stress presents the undesirable effect of stress that is known as distress.

Stress is a common problem for male and female students at universities. How this is managed may be reflected in a student's academic performance (Chima, 2007). 70% of undergraduates experience stress (Kleemann, 2014). The effects of stress can be positive or negative. Positively-used stress (eustress) can

be a motivator for an improved quality of life. Stress can be negative (distress) when it becomes destructive due to how an individual negatively perceives and reacts to it (Nwagwu, 2009).

College students have a unique cluster of stressful experiences or stressors. According to Womble (2003), there are several explanations for increased stress levels in college students. First, students must make significant adjustment to university life. Second, study pressure places strain on interpersonal relationships. Third, housing arrangements and changes in lifestyle contribute to stress. In addition, university students experience stress related to academic requirements, support systems, and ineffective coping skills. Corroborating this, Oduwaiye et al. (2017) emphasize that students studying at tertiary level are faced with increasing academic challenges. Oduwaiye said that college students can easily become overwhelmed by the workload, exams, deadlines, the feeling of intense pressure to achieve good grades, and working while attending classes (work study). Faced with many classes, assignments, tests, mid-semester and final exams, together with other academic projects, the academic programmes and demands can compel students to work rigorously to ensure they complete their work within the shortest possible time. These overwhelming academic demands can cause students to worry and feel stressed about their academic performance (Oduwaiye et al., 2017). Unsurprisingly, tertiary level students who are unable to cope with the workload are at a higher risk of experiencing academic stress. Some students balance studies and work simultaneously, which is quite stressful and in turn creates academic stress that affects their academic performance (Campbell-Phillips et al., 2020).

Several studies have found a relationship between stress and poor academic performance (Eresimadu, 2008; Nwagwu, 2009; Ukeje, 2010). Ukeje (2010) found that there is a significant negative correlation between the stress levels of college students and their academic performance. In a similar study, Nwagwu (2009) found an inverse relationship between self-reported stress level and academic performance. Stress pervades the lives of students, and tends to have an adverse impact on their mental and physical health, as well as

their ability to effectively perform schoolwork (Kleemann, 2014).

While most of the research findings support the negative relationship between stress and academic performance, a few researchers (Blonna, 2012; Clark and Rieker, 2011) have found opposing results. A study by Womble (2003) did not find any relationship between the perceived stress and academic performance of college students. Previous research has shown that only a modest 10% to 35 % of college students experience functionally impairing levels of test anxiety (Chapell et al., 2005). Academic factors were the predominant cause of stress in most students, followed by physical, social, and emotional. The majority of students with stress reported high scores of poor self-esteem, and about half scored high on depression scales (Baste and Gadkari, 2014). Results from the literature suggest that a higher level of stress is associated with poor academic performance (Sohail, 2013). Against this backdrop, the present study aims to examine the influence of stress on the academic performance of undergraduate students of human kinetics at University of Benin, Benin City, Edo State.

Academic performance, which is measured by continuous assessment tests, projects, assignments, practical and theory examination results, is one of the major goals of any educational institution. Nwagwu (2009) argues that schools are established with the aim of imparting knowledge and skills to those who pass through them, and behind all this is the idea of enhancing good academic performance. However, stakeholders in education have noted that while some students perform well in exams, others do not. They are concerned about those who do not perform well. If this poor performance goes unchecked, the aim of university education – to provide a preparatory ground for the workforce – may be unmet, which could result in a loss of confidence in university education.

While some students reported high levels of stress as the reason for their poor performances, others gave other reasons for their poor performance. Much as the situation described here causes concern, it is not yet known why students fail to attain the standards expected of them. The researcher would therefore like to discover the influence that stress has on the academic performance of human kinetic students at the University of Benin.

Research objectives
The following research objectives were set to guide the study:
1. Discover the stress levels of human kinetics students at the University of Benin.
2. Learn about the relationship between stress and the academic performance of human kinetics students.
3. Identify the sources of stress among human kinetics students at the University of Benin.
4. Find out the strategies used by human kinetics students to cope with stress.

The sub-objective of the study was to find out if there is any significant relationship between the stress level of human kinetics students at the University of Benin and their academic performance

Theoretical framework
The theoretical framework for this research is chosen to best explain the association relationship between stress and performance. In expounding the phenomenon of stress in association with performance, the researchers employed the Lazarus and Folkman Theory of Cognitive Appraisal. According to this theory, an individual's interpretation of a situation ultimately influences the extent to which the situation is perceived as stressful. Cognitive appraisals are human emotional functioning that can be a very resourceful way of gaining insight into an individual's perception of themselves, their environment, and their ability to cope with stressful situations (Campbell-Phillips et al., 2020). In other words, the emphasis is on how a student personally measures the level of academic stress they are experiencing, as well as their abilities and options in coping with it.

This research utilized the contextual model (Folkman, 1992). Folkman stated that within the contextual model, there is an underlying assumption that "coping thoughts and acts are influenced by the relationship between the person and the environment in a given stressful encounter" (p. 34). This model is derived from the cognitive appraisal model in which coping is described as employing ever-changing ways to manage the specific demands of

an appraised stressful event (Folkman, 1992). Within this model, cognitive appraisals help us determine whether a specific person-environment encounter is perceived as stressful.

If the background of the cognition is changed, the appraisal of harm may be removed and a different meaning may be attached to the encounter. This initial evaluation of the situation is called the primary appraisal. The primary appraisal is an appraisal of whether there is threat or no threat influenced by personal and environmental factors. Situations can be evaluated as irrelevant, benign, or threatening. When something is appraised as a threat, a secondary appraisal of coping options is triggered.

Primary appraisal looks at whether there is "impending harm", and secondary appraisal evaluates the "consequences of any coping action" (Lazarus, 1966, p. 208). As Folkman (1992, p. 34) describes, "in primary appraisal the person asks: 'what do I have at stake in this encounter?' and in secondary appraisal the question is 'what can I do?'".

Reappraisals shift the evaluation of situations and change coping strategies. Folkman explains that shifts can happen when the employed coping strategies change the environment or the meaning and understanding of the situation, which consequently leads to reappraisals of the situation in a cyclical motion. This phenomenon affects subsequent coping efforts and drives the constant change in coping processes from situation to situation.

Under the contextual model, coping is not only used to manage problems, but also to regulate emotions (Folkman, 1992). These two functions are categorized into problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping. Problem-focused coping strategies are used to manage or change the situation that is causing stress, while emotion-focused coping strategies are used to manage the negative feelings associated with stress (Smith and Renk, 2007).

The contextual model serves as a foundation for the researcher of this study to understand how human kinetics (HKS) students come to view a situation as stressful, as well as the options created to deal with the stressful event. This model explains that coping strategies vary among individuals and can constantly change for any one individual. In attempting to understand the academic-related stressors of human kinetics undergraduate students, we are aware that differences exist in terms of the stress experienced and the vast amount of coping options available. Within this model, the researcher is also able to gain awareness into the general type of coping strategy employed by HKS undergraduate students.

Justification
The demanding and challenging curriculum followed by HKS undergraduate students at the University of Benin, Benin City, could cause much academic stress. The researcher's aim is to verify the causes of the stressors, increase the awareness of HKS undergraduate students, and prompt the university to develop new methods to improve the program and create a more satisfying experience for undergraduate students.

This study has significance at all levels of human kinetics. At the individual level, participants will recognize the kinds of stressors that may affect their health and interfere with academic performance. High stress levels and/or poor coping skills may lead to long-term health issues long after graduation from the program. Participants may be able to use the study results to adjust their personal reactions to academic-related challenges accordingly.

It is important that university program developers are aware of campus, environmental, or program-related factors which affect student academic performance. Such factors should be addressed to provide students the best learning environment possible. In addition, if outcomes demonstrate that a need for additional stress-reduction programs exist, then the university should consider the implementation of such programs to provide students with added means to manage stress.

This study also has significance for the human kinetics profession. Human kinetics experts strive to enhance human wellbeing and endeavor to promote total fitness of the individual. The existence of stress adversely affects an individual's quality of life. Prolonged stress can result in long-term health issues, which is a matter of concern for the human kinetics profession.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The descriptive survey research design was adopted for this study. This involved identifying the variables that exist in a given situation, describing the relationship between the variables, and examining the factors that link these variables together.

The study population is undergraduate students at the Department of Human Kinetics and Sports Science, University of Benin (Table 1). According to the Academic Planning Department (2021), there are 350 undergraduate students in the department. Hence the study population consists of 350 undergraduate students from the Department of Human Kinetics and Sports Science.

Table 1 – The population of undergraduate students from 100–400 level in the Department of Human Kinetics and Sports Science, University of Benin

Levels	Population
100	70
200	104
300	80
400	96
Total	**350**

175 undergraduate students of human kinetics and sports science, comprising 50% of the population from each level, were sampled in this study. Simple random sampling technique was used in selecting the sample size, with equal representation from each level (Table 2).

In obtaining data on relationship between stress and academic performance; and the source of stress for HKS students and to what

Table 2 – Sample size of respondents

Levels	Population	Sample size
100	70	35
200	104	52
300	80	40
400	96	48
Total	**350**	**175**

level they face the same, the test instrument was the Academic Stress Scale (ASS). This ASS comprised 19 items and each item had four alternative responses derived from the modified Likert scale: "Strongly Agree" (SA), "Agree" (A), "Disagree" (D) and "Strongly Disagree" (SD). The ASS questionnaire was originally developed by Kim (1970) and is still being used by many researchers. For this study, the researcher adapted the ASS as developed by Kim (1970) and Dalia and Adel (2015) to suit Benin City HKS students' conditions/situations. The responses were rated on a four (4) point Likert scale ranging from Strongly Agree (SA) = 4 points; Agree (A) = 3 points; Disagree (D) = 2 points; Strongly Disagree (SD) = 1 point. Academic performance was measured using Grade Point Average (GPA).

The test instrument was subjected to construct and content validity. It was validated by two experts in the field of Human Kinetics and Sports Science (HKS), and one in Measurement and Evaluation. The validated 19-item ASS questionnaire had adequate construct and concurrent validity.

The instrument was pilot tested among twenty (20) students. They rated each statement and the generated data was used in calculating the reliability coefficient for the instrument, which was determined to be 0.79 (*i.e.*, $r = 0.79$) using Cronbach alpha. The validated 19-item ASS questionnaire had high internal consistency.

Data obtained were analyzed using descriptive statistics such as frequency and percentages, Pearson correlation, and mean and standard deviation. Frequency and percentage were used to analyze research question 1. The benchmark for stress level was coded as 1–11 = low; 12–22 = moderate; 23–32 = high. This was arrived at by multiplying the 8 questionnaire items related to stress level of human kinetics students by 4; being the highest score on the modified Likert scale; and then the product of 32, divided by 3 equals 11 approx. Hence a stress level score of 1–11 is deemed 'low', 12–22 is 'moderate', while 23–32 is 'high'. Arithmetically: $8 \times 4 = 32$; $32 : 3 = 11$ approx. Inferential statistics of Pearson's r was used in answering research question 2; while mean and standard deviation was used in answering research questions 3 and 4. The criterion level for analysis of research question 3 and 4 was a mean value of 2.50. This value

was obtained through the average of the four (4) Likert scale options, thus SA = 4 points, A = 3 points, D = 2 points, SD = 1 point; (4 + 3 + 2 + 1)/4 = 10/4 = 2.5

RESULTS

Stress levels of human kinetics students at the University of Benin

Table 3 shows that 80 (45.7%) respondents had moderate stress level, while 95 (54.3%) had high stress level. Thus the majority of the students indicated a high level of stress.

Table 3 – Percentage distribution of responses on stress level of human kinetics students

Stress level	Frequency	Percentage
Moderate	80	45.7
High	95	54.3
Total	**175**	**100.0**

Relationship between stress and the academic performance of human kinetics students

Table 4 shows a pearson r of −0.131, which means there is a weak negative relationship between academic performance and stress. Thus stress does not significantly affect academic performance.

Table 4 – Pearson correlation statistics showing the relationship between stress and academic performance

		Stress	Academic performance
Stress	Pearson correlation	1	−0.131
	Sig. (2 tailed)		0.084
	N	175	175
Academic performance	Pearson correlation	−0.131	1
	Sig. (2 tailed)	0.084	
	N	175	175

Sources of stress among human kinetics students at the University of Benin, Benin City, Edo State

Table 5 shows that the mean values ranged from 2.90 to 3.49, while the standard deviation values ranged from 0.615 to 1.081. With a criterion level of 2.50 for mean, the mean values show that the respondents agreed to the stressors under academic, time/balance, intrapersonal/self and relationship/social as sources of stress. The low values of the standard deviation showed that their responses do not deviate far from one another.

Table 5 – Mean and standard deviation of responses on sources of stress among human kinetics students

S/N	Sources of stress	Mean	SD	Decision
A	***Academic stressors***			
1	Getting good grades	3.46	0.632	Agree
2	Study for test and exams	3.49	0.615	Agree
3	Handling academic workload	3.46	0.725	Agree
4	Meeting deadlines for academic assessment	3.01	0.844	Agree
5	Lack of clarity about assessment task requirement	3.16	0.701	Agree

Table 5 – *continued*

S/N	Sources of stress	Mean	SD	Decision
6	Understanding academic material	3.02	0.809	Agree
7	Contributing to class discussion	2.96	0.847	Agree
B	*Time/balance stressors*			
8	Managing all my different responsibilities	3.30	0.886	Agree
9	Being too tired to study properly	2.95	0.909	Agree
10	Finding time for both academic and leisure activities	3.15	0.880	Agree
11	Not being able to manage my time effectively	3.09	0.790	Agree
C	*Intrapersonal/self-stress*			
12	Fear of failing	3.42	0.663	Agree
13	Dealing with my personal issues	3.24	0.727	Agree
14	My study skills	3.13	0.821	Agree
15	My procrastination and laziness	3.22	0.836	Agree
16	Not being sure whether I am studying the right course	2.98	0.953	Agree
17	My writing skills	2.72	1.081	Agree
18	Lack of self-discipline	3.01	0858	Agree
D	*Relationship/social stressors*			
19	Competing with other students	2.90	1.081	Agree
	Average mean	**3.14**		

Bedewy and Gabriel (2015); IJCRT (2020)

Strategies employed by human kinetics students in coping with stress

Table 6 shows that the mean response values ranged from 3.11 to 3.53, while the standard deviation values ranged from 0.702 to 0.863. The low standard deviation values indicate that their responses do not deviate much from one another.

Table 6 – Mean and standard deviation of responses on strategies employed by human kinetics students in coping with stress

S/N	Coping strategies for stress	Mean	SD	Decision
20	Making time for rest and relaxation	3.53	0.772	Agree
21	Participating in regular physical activities	3.11	0.863	Agree
22	Getting good and adequate sleep	3.52	0.702	Agree
23	Planning our daily tasks properly	3.49	0.702	Agree
	Average mean	**3.41**		

DISCUSSION

In relation to research question 1, the majority of students indicated that they experienced a high level of stress. Feelings of stress are part of a university student's life (Ganesan et al., 2018). This however is contrary to the findings of Ganesan et al. (2018) who found that the majority of University students had a moderate level of stress. According to Shaikh et al. (2004), a high level of stress among undergraduates can cause a drop in their educational endeavours and can affect both their mental and physical health. The

study indicated that university students are more stressed than individuals in any other stages of life (Kumar and Bhukar, 2013).

The findings related to research question 2 showed a weak negative relationship between academic performance and stress. This meant that stress did not significantly affect academic performance. However, it is fact that students face a wide range of ongoing normative stressors such as ongoing academic demands. Secondary and tertiary education students (United Nations Educational Scientific Cultural Organization – UNESCO, 2012) commonly report that they are experiencing ongoing stress related to their education, such as pressure to achieve high marks and concern about receiving poor grades. This finding demonstrates that education and academic performance are a significant source of stress among students. Aafreen et al. (2018) indicate that students who do not cope well with stress see a very drastic effect on their studies. Behaviour, learning, and memory can also be affected. Although an optimal level of stress can enhance ability, too much stress can cause physical and mental health problems, reduce self-esteem, and may affect academic achievement of the students (Rafidah et al., 2009). This however, runs contrary to the finding of the present study.

The findings related to research question 3 show that the students agreed to all the sources of stress, ranging from academic, time/balance, interpersonal/self and relationship/social stressors. Affirming this, a study boy Okoro (2018) showed that students experience stressors such as academic related stressors, health-related stressors, and psychosocial-related stressors during their academic career. While Aysan et al. (2001) found that some of the causes of stress among students include heavy workload, unclear assignments, difficulty understanding the context, feelings of incompetence, poor motivation to learn, participating in class presentations, relationship with family and friends, time pressure, and sleeping habits – all of which may affect a student's mental health. Mori (2000) reported that for students from a low socio-economic background, financial support does not always come easy, and this causes them to feel pressured and experience stress.

Based on the findings related to research question 4, students employ various coping strategies to contain stress. Therefore, Ganesan et al. (2018) recommend that students should be encouraged to participate in extra-curricular activities such as sports to reduce stress. Studies also indicate that distance education students experience diverse stressors and use different coping strategies to regular students (Gyambrah et al., 2017; Kumi-Yeboah, 2010; Kwaah and Essilfie, 2017; Panchabakesan, 2011). Consequently, Park and Adler (2003) state that appropriate and effective coping may buffer the effect of stressful circumstance on the physical and mental health of an individual. Coping mechanisms play a significant role in overcoming or reducing the stress experienced by individuals. People use different types of coping to overcome stress. For example, Shaikh et al. (2004) noted that some people cope by using drugs, alcohol, overeating and smoking, which are counterproductive. While some cope by exercising, meditating and listening to music, which has been proven to help reduce stress.

CONCLUSIONS

Stress is one of the major problems faced by undergraduate students at the University of Benin, Benin City. No significant relationship was found between stress and undergraduate academic performance. An enabling environment is therefore required for undergraduate students to achieve optimal academic performance. University life requires undergraduate students to find life balance, while also sticking to their timetables, meeting coursework deadlines, practicing self-regulated learning, and maintaining other social responsibilities. When striving toward academic success in the face of academic, social, and personal demands, students must set priorities to avoid stressful situations. Student study habits therefore help them to maximize the available resources – such as time, finances, social and family support, and institutional administration – to maneuver their potential stressors.

Recommendations
Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations can be made:
1. There is a need for stress intervention programs to be designed to address stress in university students. However, to design an

effective intervention, the stressors specific to university students must be determined.

2. Students should be helped with different strategies to improve their ability to cope with demanding course work.

3. Coping strategies that deal with one's own thoughts and feelings can be facilitated by accessible professional and peer counseling, student support groups, and adequate course advising.

4. University decision-makers must provide students with psychological, social, and academic counseling and guidance to decrease student stress and allow for better performance and learning. This way, they can achieve more and have better mental health in the future.

5. University management should provide students with a suitable teaching and learning environment to decrease academic stress.

Ethical aspects and conflict of interests
The author has no conflict of interests to declare.

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