

EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE AND SOCIAL SUPPORT AS PREDICTORS OF ACADEMIC STRESS AMONG UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS

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Abstract

This study examined emotional intelligence and perceived social support as predictors of academic stress among undergraduate students of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka. A total of 247 undergraduates were conveniently selected from five randomly chosen departments within the Faculty of Social Sciences. Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 25 years ($M = 21.75$, $SD = 1.83$). The Emotional Intelligence Scale, the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support and the Academic Stress Scale were employed for data collection. A predictive research design was adopted, and data were analyzed using multiple linear regression. The findings indicated that emotional intelligence was not a statistically significant predictor of academic stress ($\beta = -.044$, $p = .496$), although the relationship was negative. Similarly, perceived social support did not significantly predict academic stress ($\beta = -.057$, $p = .375$), though the direction of association was also negative. The study concludes that while emotional intelligence and social support demonstrated inverse relationships with academic stress, neither variable significantly predicted stress levels within the sampled population. It is recommended that universities implement structured psychological interventions, including counselling and emotional skills training programs, to assist students in managing academic stress more effectively.

Keywords: emotional intelligence, social support, academic stress, undergraduate students.

Introduction

Academic stress remains one of the most prevalent psychological challenges confronting university students in their pursuit of academic achievement. It encompasses a broad range of stressors, including examinations, continuous assessments, academic workload and the competitive nature of higher education environments (Charoghchian et al., 2023; Hoovanna, 2024). Persistent academic stress has been associated with adverse outcomes such as anxiety, depressive symptoms, behavioural difficulties, academic underperformance and, in severe cases, withdrawal from school. Although stress is an inevitable aspect of academic life, its impact largely depends on students' coping resources and psychological capacities. Effective stress management requires not only cognitive appraisal but also emotional regulation and access to supportive interpersonal networks.

In recent years, emotional intelligence has gained considerable attention as a psychological resource that may influence how students respond to academic demands. Originally conceptualised by Mayer and Salovey (1990) and later popularised by Goleman (1995), emotional intelligence refers to the capacity to perceive, understand, manage and utilise emotions effectively in oneself and others. It encompasses dimensions such as self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy and social skills. Individuals with higher emotional intelligence are generally better equipped to interpret stressors accurately, regulate negative emotions and adopt adaptive coping strategies. Empirical studies suggest that emotional intelligence is associated with reduced psychological distress and improved resilience in demanding academic contexts (Abbasi et al., 2018; Rakhshani et al., 2018). From this perspective, emotionally intelligent students may experience lower levels of academic stress because they are more capable of managing emotional reactions to examinations, deadlines and academic pressures.

In addition to internal emotional competencies, external relational resources such as social support play a critical role in stress reduction. Drawing from the transactional model of stress and coping proposed by Lazarus and Folkman (1984), stress is understood as a dynamic interaction between the individual and the environment, mediated by cognitive appraisal and coping resources. Within this framework, social support functions as a coping resource that can buffer the negative effects of stress. Further elaboration by Sheldon Cohen and Wills (1985) introduced the stress-buffering hypothesis, which posits that perceived support from family, peers, teachers and significant others mitigates the psychological impact of stressful events.

Social support may be emotional (expressions of empathy and care), instrumental (tangible assistance), informational (guidance and advice) or companionship-based. Empirical evidence indicates that students who perceive strong social support report lower stress levels, greater life satisfaction and enhanced academic adjustment (Akhtar et al., 2023; Abdul Aziz et al., 2023; Cristina & Gapunuan, 2023). Family support has been linked to subjective well-being, peer support to academic adjustment, and teacher support to improved coping and reduced helplessness (Hoferichter et al., 2022; Varghese et al., 2015; Rathakrishnan et al., 2023).

Consequently, social support not only alleviates stress but also promotes adaptive coping and academic persistence.

Within the Nigerian context, undergraduate students face a multiplicity of academic and socio-economic pressures. Financial instability, infrastructural challenges, high academic expectations and broader socio-political uncertainties compound the demands of university life (Kahar&Soni, 2025). These stressors may undermine students' psychological well-being and academic performance if adequate coping mechanisms are absent. Despite the recognised importance of emotional intelligence and social support in stress management, limited empirical work has systematically examined their predictive roles among Nigerian undergraduates, particularly within public universities.

Although prior studies suggest that emotionally intelligent individuals and those with strong social support networks are better able to cope with stress, inconsistencies remain regarding the magnitude and significance of these relationships across cultural contexts. Furthermore, few studies have jointly examined emotional intelligence and social support as predictors of academic stress within the same analytical model in Nigerian settings. This gap underscores the need for empirical clarification of how these psychological and social variables operate within a local academic environment.

In response to these concerns, the present study investigated emotional intelligence and perceived social support as predictors of academic stress among undergraduate students of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, using a predictive design and multiple regression analysis to determine both independent and joint contributions of the variables.

Theoretical Framework

The Transactional Model of Stress and Coping, developed by Lazarus and Folkman (1984), was adopted as the theory on which this work was based. A critical component of this theory is the concept of coping strategies, which are efforts, both behavioral and cognitive, used to manage stress. This theory is highly relevant to the study because it explicitly links stress to both internal factors (emotional intelligence) and external factors (social support). Emotional intelligence serves as a personal coping resource that influences how students appraise academic stressors and regulate their emotional responses. Similarly, social support acts as an environmental coping resource that provides tangible and emotional assistance during stressful academic situations. By framing stress as an outcome of appraisal and coping processes, the model explains why undergraduates with higher emotional intelligence and stronger social support networks are likely to experience lower academic stress compared to their counterparts. Therefore, this theory provides a solid foundation for examining the interactive roles of emotional and social resources in academic stress management.

Hypotheses

The following hypotheses guided the study:

1. Emotional intelligence will be a significant negative predictor of academic stress among undergraduate students.
2. Perceived social support will be a significant negative predictor of academic stress among undergraduate students.

Method

This chapter contains a step-by-step method of how this research was conducted, which includes; Participants, Instruments, Procedure, Design and Statistics.

Participants

Two hundred and forty-seven (247) undergraduate students participated in this study. The participants were conveniently selected from the five Departments within the Faculty of Social Sciences, Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka, which include Economics, Mass Communications, Political Science, Psychology, and Sociology and Anthropology. Their age ranged from 18 to 25 years, with a mean age of 21.75 and a standard deviation of 1.83. They were drawn using convenience sampling technique. Data showed that 120 (46.7%) were males while 127(49.4) were females. Finally, 247 (100%) were Christians.

Instruments

The study utilized three sets of scales for data collection and they include: Emotional Intelligence Scale (Wong and Law in 2002), The Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (Zimet, Dahlem, Zimet, and Farley, 1988) and Academic Stress Scale (Kohn and Frazer, 1986).

Emotional Intelligence Scale (WLEIS)

Emotional Intelligence Scale by Wong and Law (2002), is a widely used self-report measure designed to assess emotional intelligence across four core dimensions: Self-Emotional Appraisal (SEA), Others’ Emotional Appraisal (OEA), Use of Emotion (UOE), and Regulation of Emotion (ROE). The scale consists of 16 items, rated on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree), allowing respondents to indicate the extent to which each statement applies to them.

The Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS)

The Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS), by Zimet, and Farley (1988), is a widely validated instrument designed to assess perceived social support from three primary sources: family, friends, and significant others. The scale consists of 12 items distributed equally across three subscales, with each subscale measuring one dimension of social support.

Academic Stress Scale (ASS)

Academic Stress Scale (ASS) by Kohn and Frazer (1986). This scale is specifically designed to assess stressors experienced by students in academic settings. The ASS consists of 34 items that capture various dimensions of academic stress, such as pressure from examinations, workload, time management, competition, and fear of failure.

Procedure

The questionnaires were shared by the researcher with the aid of a colleague, the researcher was able to make herself friendly with the participants and they were assured that the exercise was strictly for academic purposes and that the information they released will be treated with utmost confidentiality. Participants were sampled using convenient sampling technique. The questionnaires were collected back from the participants after they were filled. Two hundred and fifty questionnaires were distributed. At the end of administering the questionnaires, two hundred and forty-seven (247) questionnaires were returned which were properly filled.

Research Design and Statistics

The study adopted predictive research design because it examines the predictive effect of the independent variables on the dependent variable. Multiple linear regression was used as the statistics for the data analysis, SPSS version 2023 was used to manage raw data

Table 2: Regression Analysis on Emotional Intelligence and Social Support as predictors of Academic Stress among undergraduate students

Predictors	R ²	Df	F	Sig.	B	T	Sig.
	.005	2(244)	.652	.522			
Emotional Intelligence					-.044	-.682	.496
Social Support					-.057	.888	.375

a. Dependent Variable: Academic Stress

Result

The result in table 1 above revealed that emotional intelligence was not a significant negative predictor of academic stress ($\beta = -.044$ $p < .496$) and also perceived social support was not a significant predictor of academic stress ($\beta = -.057$ $p < .375$)

Discussion

The present study examined the predictive role of emotional intelligence and perceived social support on academic stress among undergraduate students. The findings indicate that neither emotional intelligence nor social support significantly predicted academic stress. Together, these predictors explained only a small fraction of the variance ((0.5%)), highlighting that other factors may have a stronger influence on students’ stress levels. Although emotional intelligence has been widely associated with effective emotional regulation and stress management (Extremera, Durán, & Rey, 2019; MacCann et al., 2020), the present study did not find a significant relationship. This may reflect contextual factors unique to the sampled population, such as academic pressure, institutional policies, or cultural differences in emotional expression and regulation. Similarly, the lack of a

significant association between perceived social support and academic stress contrasts with prior studies emphasizing social support as a protective factor in stressful situations (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Hefner & Eisenberg, 2009). It is possible that the quality, accessibility, or relevance of available support was insufficient to buffer academic stress among these students.

These findings have important implications for research and practice. First, interventions aimed solely at enhancing emotional intelligence or social support may not be sufficient to reduce academic stress in this population. Future research could explore other predictors, such as coping strategies, resilience, time management, financial pressures, or personality traits, to better understand stress dynamics. Additionally, examining moderating or mediating variables may provide insight into conditions under which emotional intelligence or social support could become more influential.

Limitations of the Study

The study's limited sample, consisting of only undergraduate students from Nnamdi Azikiwe University, may affect the generalizability of its findings. The focus on a specific demographic may limit the applicability of results to other universities or populations. Additionally, the reliance on self-reported measures may introduce bias, as participants may provide socially desirable responses rather than accurate reflections of their feelings.

Recommendations

1. Universities should implement programs that goes beyond enhancing emotional intelligence among students. These programs can include workshops that focus on developing positive self-image and resilience against negative evaluations.
2. Educational institutions should create supportive environments that encourage open discussions about academic stress. This can involve integrating these topics into the curriculum and providing safe spaces for students to express their concerns.

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