

## **Stress Management Skills and University Students' Academic Behaviour: Implications for Counselling**

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**Abstract:** This study investigated between stress management skills and academic behaviour of undergraduate students in Nigerian universities. A total of 800 undergraduate students randomly selected from 2 universities participated in the study. Three null hypotheses were tested using data generated from research instruments. The instruments included a modified stress management scale adopted from Blonna and an academic behaviour scale developed and validated by the researcher with reliability co-efficient of 0.81 and 0.75, respectively. Data generated from these instruments were correlated using Pearson product moment correlation method. Results showed strong positive relationship between stress management skills and academic behaviour. It was also found that stress management skills and academic behaviour are not gender sensitive. It was recommended that stress management skills training should be given prominence in universities' guidance and counselling programmes, while concerned authorities should endeavour to provide facilities that may help to reduce academic stress.

**Key words:** Stress management skills, academic behavior, gender, undergraduates

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### **INTRODUCTION**

There are various potential stressors that students face on a daily basis. These include the challenge of properly adjusting to the campus life, which is quite different from their home environments. Lifestyle change is quite challenging. The more life changes an individual experiences, the more the stress the individual faces and the more likely it is that illness and disease will result (Greenberg, 1999). The enormity of academic work, the rush for space in lecture rooms, the harsh economic conditions, which makes procurement of basic needs almost impossible and the need to achieve academic excellence against all odds are some of the major potential stressors to the Nigerian students. Others are the incessant power outage, which makes relaxation almost impossible after a highly stressful day. The challenges of developing necessary competence, managing emotions, time management, managing relationships, reacting to a noisy environment and coping with a highly tensed social situation on campuses are also stress inducing.

Stress is variously defined. For instance, Blonna (2005) defined stress as a holistic transaction between the individual and a stressor that results in the body's mobilization of a stress response. Stress is also defined as a combination of a stressor and stress reactivity. A stressor has only the potential of eliciting a stress

reaction. A stressor reactivity is the tough processes, which interprets the stressor as a cause of stress (Greenberg, 1999). These definitions show that what is considered a stressor for one person may not be a stressor for another. Thus, a stressor is any physical, psychological, or environmental events or condition that initiates the stress response (Fortner, 2002).

A stressful person is prone to several health problems and psychological disorders. Stress has been cited as a cause of major illnesses, such as migraine, ulcer, backache and rheumatoid arthritis (Payne and Hahn, 2002). Stress is also found to upset peoples' self-esteem, attitude, interest and general intellectual ability (Fortner, 2002). Stress is a common problem to male and female students in schools and the way it is managed may reflect in their academic performance (Salami, 2001). The effects of stress can be positive or negative. Positively used, stress can be a motivator for an improved quality of life. Stress can be negative, when it becomes destructive as a result of how an individual negatively perceived it and reacted to it. Stress, especially one that is noise induced can lead to increased blood pressure, increased heart rate, increased fatigue, depressed mood and decreased mental and physical performance (Blonna, 2005).

Academic behaviour points to individuals' disposition to academic activities including lecture

attendance, participation in tutorials, submission of assignments, use of library, study habits, note-taking and preparation for examinations (Akinade, 2001). Effective learning and sound academic behaviour are said to constitute an integral part of the goal of schooling (Hassan, 2006). Academic behaviour is something of great importance to parents, teachers and students themselves. Even the larger society is aware of the long term effects of positive or negative academic behaviour since graduates from educational institutions are expected to shape the destiny of the society (Salami, 2001). Unfortunately, academic behaviour of undergraduates is becoming worrisome and this has remained a matter of grave concern to many educationists (Aremu, 2001).

Could it be that the level of stress being experienced by Nigerian students has a bearing with the reported negative trend in their academic behaviour? Some researchers have reported a strong relationship between level of stress and academic interest (Fortner, 2002), between stress level and mental performance (Blonna, 2005) and between stress level and academic behaviour (Fortner, 2002). Therefore, this study investigates the relationship between students' stress management skills and their academic behaviour.

**Statement of problem:** Since, researchers have reported strong relationship between stress and academic behaviour (Blonna, 2005; Fortner, 2002), could there be any relationship between students' ability to manage stress and their academic behaviour? This study is an investigation of the relationship between stress management skills and students' academic behaviour.

**Research hypotheses:** The following null hypotheses were tested in the study:

**HO<sub>1</sub>:** There is no significant relationship between stress management skills and academic behaviour of Nigerian undergraduate students.

**HO<sub>2</sub>:** There is no significant difference between stress management skills of male and female undergraduates.

**HO<sub>3</sub>:** There is no significant difference between academic behaviour of male and female undergraduates.

**Significance of the study:** This study is meant to provide empirical evidences, which will serve as useful guides to school counsellors, educational psychologists, teachers, school administrators, parents and policy makers who may be working to improve students' academic behaviour. The findings of the study apart from adding to available

literature on the subject matter have the potential to generate more research interests that could enhance an understanding of the problem of stress management and academic behaviour.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study employs the descriptive research design meant to clearly depict any relationship between stress management skills and academic behaviour. The target population comprised of all the undergraduate students in 2 of the universities located in Ogun State, Nigeria.

**Sample and sampling technique:** A total of 800 students randomly selected constituted the sample. The stratified random sampling technique was employed in selecting the sample. Students were stratified based on gender such that equal number of participants represented each of the 2 genders (male or female).

**Instrumentation:** The Stress Management Scale adapted from Blonna (2005), with slight modifications to reflect the reality of the Nigerian environment was used to collect data on students' stress management skills. The SMS was designed to measure stress management skills using 16 items including I schedule my study to suit my nature. I do feel that I am in control of my affairs. I will rather relax than loose self-control etc. The current Academic Behaviour Scale (ABS) designed by the researcher was used as measures of academic behaviour. The instrument contained 15 items including I hardly miss any lecture in a week. I always turn in assignments on time. I don't participate in tutorials, etc.

**Psychometric properties of the instrument:** The Stress Management Scale (SMS) and the Academic Behaviour Scale were trial tested to establish their validity and reliability. Through test re-test method, the Pearson Product moment Correlation analysis of the scores generated from repeated administrations indicated 0.81 and 0.75 co-efficient of reliability for the 2 instruments, respectively.

**Scoring and method of data analysis:** The SMS and ABS were scored on a 4 point scale Likert format, whereby Rarely = 1 point, Sometimes = 2 points, Usually = 3 points and Always = 4points. The scores were collated for analysis using the Pearson Product Moment Correlation method.

## RESULTS

The results of data analysis are presented in the following summary tables. Table 1 shows a correlation co-efficient of 0.82 significant at  $p < 0.05$ . Hence, the null

Table 1: Relationship between stress management skills and academic achievement

Group	N	Mean	S.D.	df	r	p-value
Stress management skills	800	62.312	12.72	798	0.823	0.021
Academic behaviour	800	62.323	8.12			

Table 2: Gender difference in participants' stress management skills

Group	N	Mean	S.D.	df	t	p-value
Male	400	62.623	6.9	798	1.526	0.210
Female	400	62.231	7.4			

Table 3: Gender difference in participants' academic behaviour

Group	N	Mean	S.D.	df	t	p-value
Male	400	3.25	1.4	798	1.769	0.083
Female	400	3.23	1.6			

hypothesis stated above is rejected in favour of the alternative hypothesis. This means that there is a strong positive relationship between stress management skills and undergraduates' academic behaviour.

Table 2 depicts no significant gender difference in participants' stress management skills ( $t = 1.526$ ;  $p > 0.05$ ). Thus, the postulated null hypothesis is retained. This means that stress management skills is not gender sensitive.

Table 3 reveals no significant gender difference in participants' academic behaviour ( $t = 1.769$ ;  $p > 0.05$ ). Therefore, the null hypothesis stated above is retained. This means that academic behaviour is not gender sensitive.

## DISCUSSION

The findings of this study are quite informative and plausible. The finding that there is a strong positive relationship between stress management skills and undergraduates' academic behaviour further revealed the prevalence of stressors in educational institutions (Aremu, 2001). Undergraduates face several challenges that are quite stressful in Nigerian universities. These include incessant disruption of academic work as a result of strikes by students, academic or non-academic staff, social insecurity due to fear of cult activities, the harsh economic conditions and incessant power outage, which often make lecture rooms quite uncomfortable. It is also interesting that stress management skills and academic behaviour are not gender sensitive. This means gender difference did not mediate undergraduates' stress management skills and academic behaviour. The findings suggest that gender difference did not moderate the relationship between stress management skills and academic behaviour. These results buttress the opinion that both male and female students are prone to stress in

Nigerian schools and its management is necessary to ensure progressive academic behaviour (Salami, 2001). The extent to which undergraduates (male or female) are able to manage these challenges may determine their academic growth. This lends credence to Blonna (2005) who reported a strong relationship between stress level and mental performance. The results also corroborate Fortner (2002) who found a strong relationship between stress and academic performance. This suggests that whether one is a male or female, the way the individual manages stress has a bearing on his or her academic behaviour.

**Implications for counselling:** The findings emanating from this study again bring into fore, the need to provide adequate guidance and counselling services to students in order to assist them manage stress effectively. The findings also imply that stress management skills should form part of the training, which counsellors should give to students whose academic behaviours fall short of the expected standards.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study revealed significant positive relationship between stress management skills and undergraduates' academic behaviour. Stress management skills could positively influence academic behaviour. Hence, it is quite imperative for students to learn stress management skills so as to be able to cope with the highly stressful academic environment in Nigerian universities. These skills should form part of the orientation services to be rendered by university counselling centres. It is also recommended that genuine effort should be made by concerned authorities to provide adequate facilities such as lecture rooms, relaxation centres and secured social environment so that stress can be reduced to the barest minimum. It is hoped that a careful consideration and implementation of the recommendations will be of immense benefit to the education system.

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