

Academic Pressure and Coping Strategies Among Student Nurses During the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Cross-Sectional Study

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ABSTRACT

Objective: Academic pressure on students has an impact on nursing students' well-being during the pandemic. Addressing such problems can lead to their academic success and requires appropriate coping mechanisms to deal with the situation. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the academic pressure and students' coping strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Methods: This study employed a descriptive-cross-sectional design with the involvement of the 211 student nurses of the University of Tabuk, Tabuk City, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

Results: Gender was not found to be significant with coping strategies, but it was found to be significant with academic pressure ($t = -2.299$; $P = 0.023$). There were significant differences in coping ($t = -2.24$; $p = 0.026$) and academic pressure ($t = -2.390$; $p = .018$) based on family size. The marital status had no difference on coping but did have a significant difference on academic pressure ($t = -2.452$; $P = 0.015$). There was a significant difference in coping ($F = 3.658$; $P = .027$) and academic pressure ($F = 7.297$; $P 0.001$) by age. Also, the year level demonstrates a significant difference in coping ($F = 3.658$; $P = 0.020$) and academic pressure ($F = 4.188$, $P < 0.001$). Furthermore, there was a significant relationship between coping and academic stress ($r = .338$; $P < 0.000$).

Conclusion: Gender and marital status had no difference on coping strategies, but they did have a significant difference on academic pressure. Family size, age, and grade level all had an impact on coping strategies and academic pressure. Moreover, there was a significant correlation between coping and academic pressure. Any formal assistance given to students should be proactive in its approach and be adapted to the specific coping mechanisms used by the target population. Exercise encouragement, opportunities for social activity, and peer support initiatives should all be given top priority.

Keywords: Academic pressure, Coping strategies, Student nurses, COVID 19, Saudi Arabia

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to the adoption of quarantine and isolation protocols at a historically unprecedented scale. Educational institutions are left with no choice but to adapt to a full virtual learning system in order to continually provide education to the younger generations. According to Winthrop¹, the transition from face-to-face classes into virtual learning had a huge impact on the academic routines of the students. This scenario impels students to adopt a total virtual learning experience conducted in the safety of their homes. For example, students now have access to more flexible delivery methods that offer numerous options and avenues for individuals². With the new system of learning presented to students, they may be faced with an unfamiliar learning environment, even if it is in the comfort of their home, and a new learning strategy that may be viewed as compatible with the current situation.

While nursing students are mandated to continue conducting classes virtually, the growing number of requirements like activities, quizzes, tests, and presentations appears to trigger a feeling of constant pressure among them. This pressure may also translate into academic pressure. According to Durrette³, "academic pressure" can be defined as the experience when a student is burdened by the increasing demands of energy expenditures and time in order to achieve academic goals.

Students of medical-related fields, like nursing, are known bearers of such pressure regarding their academic lives. As such, it results in a strong stress response on the body, whereas regular responsibilities like work, financial, or academic obligations can only cause minor stress responses over time. In both circumstances, the stress response can be altered, which can have harmful repercussions on health⁴. The psychological well-being of nursing students during the pandemic is an important part of their academic success and requires appropriate coping mechanisms to deal with the situation. An attempt to investigate the perceived stress and coping strategies among university students⁵ was conducted, but fewer studies have correlated the situation to the pandemic⁶.

Despite the fact that numerous of coping strategies have been documented, they can be divided into two categories: approach strategies (also known as active) and evasive strategies (also known as disengagement or avoidance). In approach strategies, in the presence of a stressor, cognitive and behavioral responses are directed toward making an active response that directly changes the problem (primary control) or the negative emotions that may be associated with it (secondary control)⁷. This classification includes different responses such as seeking support, planning, taking actions, a positive reappraisal of the situation, and/or acceptance. In the evasive strategies, there are cognitive and behavioral mechanisms that may be utilized in order to

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not be involved in or totally avoid stressful situations, like an activity that may be distractive, denial of the situation, and maybe wishful thinking⁷. Earlier study findings showed that nursing students were exposed to a high stress level due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but their flexibility and adaptation techniques were only partially adequate to overcome the stress and to build an appropriate coping strategy that enabled them to deal with the situation⁸.

This study is of significance as the academic pressure on the students has an impact on their well-being during the pandemic. Addressing such issues can lead to academic success, but it requires appropriate coping mechanisms. Being aware of and understanding students' clinical practice stressors and coping strategies in different situations during clinical training provides educators with valuable information to maximize their students' learning opportunities. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the academic pressure and students' coping strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic.

METHODOLOGY

Design: A descriptive-cross-sectional design was used in this study to investigate academic pressure and students' coping strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Participants: The 211 nursing students at the University of Tabuk in Saudi Arabia who were enrolled in the 2019-2020 school year were the ones who took part in the study. The following criteria are required for participation in this study: (a) enrollment in both theory and practice; (b) comprehension of English; and (c) willingness to participate. Excluded are those students who were in the bridge program.

Setting: This study was conducted at the University of Tabuk, specifically the College of Nursing.

Data Collection: The necessary data was gathered via a self-administered questionnaire, which was started after receiving institutional review board approval. The researchers performed an orientation for the respondents before the actual data collection in order to explain the study's purpose, the scope of their participation, and their rights as participants. During the participants' break, the researchers gave them the questionnaire right away. A 100% return rate was achieved during the data collection period, which ran from September to November 2022.

Instruments: The COPE Inventory by Carver et al.⁹ was used to assess the coping levels of the nursing students. Meanwhile, the academic pressure was adapted from the instruments of Azila-Gbettor et al.¹⁰ Both tools are anchored on a 5-point Likert scale, with statements that are answered by marking the questions from 1 to 5. This is operationalized as: 5—most of the time, 4—frequently, 3—sometimes, 2—occasionally, and 1—rarely.

A validity and reliability test was conducted on the tool. The items in the questionnaire were checked and reviewed by three expert panels that were invited by the researchers. These experts served as research consultants for their respective Saudi Arabian universities. Face validity produced a valid result that was seen as covering the idea it aimed to measure. Then, the instrument was tested using the content validity index (CVI). The questionnaire had an overall CVI score of 0.92 for relevance and a CVI score of 0.91 for clarity, indicating a good level of content validity. To test the reliability of the questionnaire, it was piloted by 20 student nurses. The questionnaire's reliability coefficient was 0.78.

Data Analysis: The demographic data was derived using frequency and percentage values. Age and year level differences were assessed using a one-way ANOVA, whereas gender, marital status, and family size were assessed using the t-test. Pearson's correlation coefficient was used to determine the association between coping strategies and academic pressure. At a 0.05 level of significance, all statistical analyses were carried out using (SPSS version 22 IBM Software Group, Chicago, IL, USA) version 25.

RESULTS

Table 1 presents the demographic profiles of the participants. Of the 211 participants, almost half are 21–25 years old (48.3%), the majority are females (70.6%), single (80.6%), with family size below five (63.5%), and most of them belong to level 3 (68.2%).

Table 1: Demographic profiles of the participants. N= 211

Demographics	Frequency	Percent
Age		
20 years old and below	57	27.0
21- 25 years old	102	48.3
26 years old and above	52	24.6
Gender		
Male	62	29.4
Female	149	70.6
Marital Status		
Single	170	80.6
Married	41	19.4
Family size		
Below 5 in the family	134	63.5
Above 5 family members in the house	77	36.5
Year level		
Level 1	1	.5
Level 2	33	15.6
Level 3	144	68.2
Level 4	24	11.4
Level 5	6	2.8
Level 7	3	1.4

Table 2 presents the differences between demographics, academic pressures, and coping strategies. Of note, gender was not found to be significant with coping strategies, however, it was found to be significant with academic pressure ($t = -2.299$; $P = 0.023$), where males are more affected ($2.77 \pm .978$) than their female counterparts. There were significant differences in coping ($t = -2.24$; $p = 0.026$) and academic pressure ($t = -2.390$; $p = .018$) based on family size, indicating that families with more than five members are more affected than those with fewer than five members. There is no significant difference in coping based on marital status, but there is a significant difference in academic pressure ($t = -2.452$; $P = 0.015$), with married students being more affected than single students.

In terms of age, there was a significant difference in coping ($F = 3.658$; $P = .027$) and academic pressure ($F = 7.297$; $P 0.001$), indicating that older participants perceived these factors more strongly than younger participants. Furthermore, the year level differs significantly in terms of coping ($F = 5$, $P = 0.020$) and academic pressure ($F = 4.188$, $P 0.001$), with both levels 3 perceived as higher than the other year levels.

Table 2: Differences between demographics and academic pressures and coping strategies

Variables		Mean	SD	T	df	Sig (2-tailed)
Gender						
Coping	Male	3.3331	.81903	.633	209	.528
	Female	3.2678	.61781			
Academic Pressure	Male	2.7766	.97807	-2.299	209	.023
	Female	3.0705	.78482			
Family size						
Coping	Below 5 in the family	3.2078	.71732	-2.246	209	.026
	Above 5 family members in the house	3.4247	.59453			
Academic Pressure	Below 5 in the family	2.8787	.93387	-2.390	209	.018
	Above 5 family members in the house	3.1675	.66118			
Marital Status						
Coping	Single	3.2568	.71032	-1.313	209	.191
	Married	3.4122	.53686			
Academic Pressure	Single	2.9141	.87272	-2.452	209	.015
	Married	3.2744	.71223			
Age						
		Mean	SD	F	df	Sig.
Coping	20 years old and below	3.0851	.73198	3.658	2,208	.027
	21- 25 years old	3.3407	.57976			
	26 years old and above	3.4029	.77113			
Academic Pressure	20 years old and below	2.6904	.84338	7.297	2, 208	.001
	21- 25 years old	2.8875	.75706			
	26 years old and above	3.1975	.94479			
Year Level						
Coping	Level 1	4.2500	-	2.162	5, 205	.020
	Level 2	3.0197	.81777			
	Level 3	3.3691	.60467			
	Level 4	3.2063	.82992			
	Level 5	3.0917	.69240			
	Level 7	3.0000	.62650			
Academic Pressure	Level 1	3.1573	-	4.188	5,205	.001
	Level 2	2.6682	.87221			
	Level 3	2.65	.77739			
	Level 4	2.5208	1.06034			
	Level 5	2.5167	.64550			
	Level 7	2.9000	.43589			

Table 3 presents the correlation between coping strategies and academic pressure. There is found significant correlation between coping and academic pressure ($r = .338$; $P < 0.000$).

Table 3: Correlations between coping strategies and academic pressure

Correlations		
	Coping	Academic Pressure
Coping	Pearson Correlation	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
Academic Pressure	Pearson Correlation	.338**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

DISCUSSION

This study aims to investigate the academic pressure and students' coping strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic. Of note, gender was not found to be significant with coping strategies, which means that the coping strategies employed by nursing students are consistent across

genders. This result aligns with the study of Sheroun and colleagues¹¹; nevertheless, it contradicts Huang and partners¹² study, in which they concluded that there are psychological disparities between men and women in the midst of a public health catastrophe such as the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, Ni and associates¹³ conducted a study in which the authors found that the use of effective coping mechanisms was more prevalent among female nursing students. One explanation could be that the vast majority of the students who participated in the study were women. However, it was found to be significant with academic pressure, where males are more affected than their female counterparts. This implies that males in Saudi Arabian cultures, where they are encouraged to take charge, stand up for what they believe in, and speak their minds, are less likely to seek professional assistance, both within the medical community¹⁴ and in the general population¹⁵. This finding coincides with the study of Rahman and partners¹⁶, whereby the authors hypothesized that the reason males experienced higher levels of academic stress than females were because male students were under greater pressure to achieve high grades and graduate from college as quickly as possible in order to launch successful careers. The vast majority of studies, on the other hand, came to the conclusion

that females experience far higher levels of stress than males¹⁷⁻¹⁹. Also, in the study of Bedewy and Gabriel²⁰, the authors indicated that male and female students reported the same levels of academic stress. It is possible that disparities in the social and educational environment, in addition to the subjectivity involved in quantifying self-reported stress, are to blame for the inconsistent gender connection with academic pressure in nursing students. Successful intervention tactics and programs to prevent or minimize student stress have been introduced at certain nursing colleges. Nursing students benefited from these initiatives because they led to lower levels of stress and anxiety as well as higher levels of spirituality, empathy, and the adoption of healthy coping mechanisms. These measures reduced nursing students' stress and its negative impact on their health and academic performance. There is a lot of work that needs to be done to make the learning environment for nurses more comfortable and less stressful.

There were significant differences in coping and academic pressure based on family size, indicating that families with more than five members are more affected than those in the lower range. This means that the number of people living in a household has a considerable impact on the students' stress levels and their ability to deal with stressful situations. This study confirms the findings of prior research showing a correlation between family size and academic stress levels and coping strategies. Feng²¹ claims that having more siblings shortens a student's time in school, lowers one's educational level²², and makes it less likely that a student will attend school²³. In addition to the fact that the number of siblings a student has is usually regarded as a significant factor that impacts that student's future academic success²⁴, the family has been acknowledged as having a significant impact on the academic performance of students²⁵. This finding, however, runs contrary to the results of Catungal and colleagues²⁶, in which the authors specified that there is no evidence to suggest that the number of siblings has a significant association with coping mechanisms. This discrepancy can be explained by the study's demographics, which consisted of students with exceptional needs. These findings point to the need for educational institutions to implement psychoeducational treatments, such as parent training, to assist guardians in fostering harmonious relationships between students of different ages and mediating conflicts that may arise. Additional clinical scales, observational data, and self-reports from siblings could be useful in future studies on sibling relationships and personality traits. The relationship between the factors under consideration may be more easily understood with the help of qualitative research. To get a clearer picture, longitudinal investigations are needed.

There is no significant difference in coping based on marital status, which means that whether they are single or married, nursing students' coping mechanisms remain constant but significant to academic pressure, with married students being more affected than single students. This implies that married students would have a more difficult time adjusting to campus than single students, given their additional and ongoing duties at home. This finding is on par with other literature in Saudi Arabia and elsewhere, which discovered that the difficulties that married students face lead to a variety of negative outcomes, including poor academic performance, stress, time and financial constraints, and role contagion among other students. As stated in the Ciciolla and Luthar²⁷ study, since home, family, and emotional adjustment are more important to married students than extracurricular and student-related activities at college, it's possible that they won't be able to engage completely in these areas. In response to a stressful event like college, married students are predicted to show poor levels of adjustment⁵. However, because their coping resources are diminished when they are divided across domains, married students must adapt by concentrating their efforts where they are most needed²⁸. These

results echo a study that found that married individuals felt lonely or alone during the first hundred days of lockdown and that they were more likely to retain social relationships²⁹. During a time of crisis, the importance of social support as a mediator of mental health outcomes cannot be overstated³⁰. Counseling services for married students should be offered in nursing educational institutions to help them learn how to prioritize their responsibilities and organize their schedules so that they can maximize their academic success.

In terms of age, older participants perceived higher levels of coping and academic pressure than younger participants. This implies that the reduction in cognitive ability with age has long been recognized, suggesting that the increased stress experienced by the older students may be related to this decline. As a result, older students are unable to assimilate instructional information and develop new skills³¹. This finding is similar to that of Shahabi and associates' study³², which demonstrated that older participants reported greater levels of stress than their younger counterparts. Nevertheless, this study challenges the findings of numerous studies³³, which determined that younger students experience greater academic stress than older students, because the latter are better equipped to handle the intellectual rigors of university life³⁴. Furthermore, Aihie and Ohanaka³⁵ discovered that younger and older students exhibit the same amount of exhibited academic stress. This disparity could be explained by the fact that the participants in these other studies were younger students. The findings show that older students should get special consideration. It is recommended that particular attention be paid to the sources of stress among older students. Students in their final year of high school would greatly benefit from having stress management included as part of the typical orientation program organized for these students, as this would give them a head start on learning effective coping mechanisms and mitigating the potential negative effects of stress on their academic and social performance.

The year level demonstrates a significant difference with coping and academic pressure, specifically on level 3, which the participant perceived as higher than the other year levels. This means that level 3 students have less university experience and are more susceptible to academic pressure than their counterparts³⁴. This result lends credence to the findings of earlier studies. According to the Al-Sowygh³ study, students in their third year, who are more likely to be obliged to practice advanced laboratory procedures than their first- and second-year counterparts, noted that the stress caused by a "shortage of allocated laboratory time" was substantially more intense. As indicated in Waghachavare and colleagues³⁶ study, a high relationship between stress and depression and anxiety was identified among junior year college students. When asked about the coping techniques they employed, participants at level 3 said that maintaining or increasing their level of physical activity was one of the most often employed strategies³⁷. People who felt their friendships had strengthened since the pandemic's start were also more likely to have increased their physical activity, which may reflect the fact that exercise was one of the few acceptable reasons to leave the house and meet up with another person even during the most stringent quarantine regulations³⁸. The use of coping mechanisms that are based on mindfulness, such as yoga and meditation, or apps that promote psychological wellbeing, was much more common among junior students³⁰.

There is a significant correlation between coping and academic pressure, which means that the students have employed a variety of coping mechanisms to deal with academic challenges such as stress brought on by assignments, caring for patients, instructors and other members of the nursing staff, workload, peers, daily life, and a lack of professional knowledge and skills. This finding corroborates

those of other investigations. As stated in various studies, students in the nursing profession are more open to problem-focused coping techniques^{11,39}. Before the pandemic, a survey indicated that transference was the most common coping strategy adopted by nursing students, followed by optimism and problem-solving, with avoidance being the least common⁴⁰. Considering COVID-related occurrences were uncontrollable, nursing students could have resorted to emotion-focused coping techniques such as avoidance and transference during the study period⁴¹. These findings have significant implications for nursing education and practice, highlighting the need for institutions to invest in the emotional well-being of their students and staff by providing them with counseling and teaching them how to use a wide range of coping mechanisms. Thus, it will benefit the nursing student, their loved ones, and eventually their patients.

Study Implication

Students are currently an essential resource for the health care sector and for the general public. Both the patient's well-being and the prevention of future pandemics depend on nurse educators and health authorities determining and executing the needed changes in training and safety procedures. Prior to the student's entry into clinical practice, standards and techniques should be integrated into existing nursing courses. All nursing universities in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia should implement this study to learn more about academic pressure and coping mechanisms. To better prepare future nurses for the challenges they will face, it is crucial that research and policy efforts be prioritized in the areas of students' academic pressure and coping mechanisms. Furthermore, in order to advance the field, researchers will need to conduct an even larger-scale version of this study at institutions in several different nations. Future studies would benefit greatly from longitudinal data collected through methods like qualitative interviews or focus groups, which would shed light on the reasons why students selected particular coping mechanisms.

CONCLUSION

Gender and marital status had no effect on coping strategies, but they did have an effect on academic pressure. Family size, age, and grade level all had an impact on coping strategies and academic pressure. Moreover, there was a significant correlation between coping and academic pressure. Any formal assistance given to students should be proactive in its approach and be adapted to the specific coping mechanisms used by the target population. Exercise encouragement, opportunities for social activity, and peer support initiatives should all be given top priority.

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