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Mediating Role of Study Habits Between the Relationship of Academic Stress and Mental Well-Being

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Abstract

Academic stress has become a significant concern among university students, potentially impacting their mental well-being and academic performance. While study habits are theorized to serve as protective factors, the mediating mechanisms through which they influence the stress-wellbeing relationship remain unclear. This study investigated the mediating role of study habits in the relationship between academic stress and mental well-being among university students. A cross-sectional study was conducted with 258 university students from various academic disciplines. Participants completed standardized

measures including the Academic Stress Scale, Study Habits Inventory Scale, Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale. Mediation analyses were performed using PROCESS macro for SPSS, examining both overall study habits and specific components (time management, note-taking strategies, concentration and focus, reading comprehension, and exam preparation) as potential mediators. Academic stress showed a significant positive correlation with study habits while mental well-being demonstrated weak, non-significant correlations with both academic stress and study habits Simple mediation analysis revealed that overall study habits did not significantly mediate the academic stress-mental well-being relationship. In the multiple mediation model, only reading comprehension emerged as a significant mediator while other study habit components showed non-significant indirect effects.

Keywords: Academic stress, study habits and mental well-being.

Introduction

Pursing higher education beyond high school can be a difficult experience, with increasing academic demands and pressure leading to heightened stress levels. University's pupils face a multitude of stress factors which includes academic rigor, financial responsibilities and personal relationship, which impact their well-being and academic performance. Students who use effective coping mechanisms are better able to handle stress, succeed academically, and preserve their physical and emotional well-being.

The higher education landscape is changing quite dramatically over the last few years, and students are now faced with such unprecedented challenges that their mental health and academic performance are suffering (Martin et al., 2020). Modern university students are exposed to a multi-faceted combination of stress, such as demands of teaching them the technologies, money situation, as well as greater academic expectation so that the levels of psychological distress keep rising (Richardson et al., 2017; Selwyn, 2016).

Academic stress

Academic stress can usually be experienced in the academic cluster and it is as a result of both individual and group requirement. Such stress is attributed to the pressure of education on students and teachers (Barbayannis et al., 2022). Chandra (2021) further expounds on the notion describing academic-stress as a psychological reaction that arises in a situation where the students are faced with academic challenges. The reaction results in psychological imbalance which compels students to solve the problems on ground in order to regain their personal balance.

Academic competitiveness in most universities in the world has improved and institutions are upgrading education standards. This has enhanced the level of competition within study institutions that has exposed students to high levels of stress owing to the need to engage in curricular or extra-curricular activities to address the current professional standards in the contemporary globalized society (Huang et al., 2020). The study revealed that adolescents and students at the university have a stressful state that is associated with such concerns as their physical appearance, grades, performance at work and relationships with people close to them and worry about academic and career success was found to be one of the leading stressors .

Mental wellbeing

Stress presents itself as a leading factor that has implicated mental issues in university students. It has been shown that examinations, the need to perform well and strict deadlines surrounding complicated course work contribute immensely to the poor wellbeing of the student (Robotham & Julian, 2006). Higher education in the US has also been increasing the pressure due to the growing competition in higher education, and rising fee education and demands of better career opportunities in a more competitive job market (Be dewy & Gabriel, 2015).

The problem concerning mental health in the context of university students is quite worrisome since nearly 35 percent of college students studied have clinical depression and 42 percent stated they have an anxiety disorder (Auerbach et al., 2018; Eisenberg et al., 2013). This has become a widespread phenomenon, as highlighted by the WHO (2020), which stands out in the

specific domain of public health because there is an area on which students are focusing their attention within the university – this concern is increasing. The increase indeed is striking because it occurs during significant period of education and personal development.

In a university , academic stress is a serious issue that needs to be addressed. Several research have shown that academic stress can negatively affect a number of academic factors, such as coping mechanisms (Basith et al., 2021) and performance and achievement (Akgun & Ciarrochi, 2023). Studies repeatedly demonstrate that high levels of academic stress are associated with poorer performance, higher dropout rates, and detrimental impacts on mental and physical health (Rayan & Twibell, 2000).

Study Habits

Study habits refer to the techniques and practice that students consistently use in their academic work. According to Clarke et al., (2021) and Gilavand & Emad (2021), these habits such as time management, organization, study environment and learning strategies are crucial for enhancing academic performance. With the time, these processes develop into definite routines, which depend on the motivation and determination of a student. Study habits are important as they play a central role in academic success.

Study habits are not only essential in meeting the rising academic activities in college life, but they form an important consideration in effective planning and study skills. According to Kohansal et al., (2023), intelligence is not sufficient in ensuring academic progress; the study habits must be powerful. Study practice should be developed through joint efforts of educators, psychologists, parents and students and aim at effective learning and preparing students to future challenges (Remaycuna-Vasquez et al., 2023).

Mediating role of study habits

Study habits have become one of the possible mediators between academic tension and psychological health outcomes. The studies have shown that productive studying strategies, including time management, note-taking strategies, and self-control strategies can be a protective factor that could help manage adverse effects of academic stress (Crede & Kuncel,

2008; Zimmerman & Kitsantas, 2014). Individuals with well-structured study habits have proven to deal with and adapt to stress as well as better academic accommodation (Chen et al., 2019).

Effects of academic stress are not limited to mental health issues at the time of execution of the stressful task. Their side effects can incorporate an extended profession readiness issue, lower graduation rates, and lifelong mental health issues that can undermine students in their professional years to come (Browen et al., 2018; Eisenberg et al., 2013; WHO, 2020). This highlights the need of study habits as a protective factor in examining the relationship between academic stress and mental health, particularly its role and the manner in which it should be addressed.

Determining the mediating process of the study habits is critical in designing specific interventions on helping the students and their mental health to succeed in academics. This relationship requires further investigation to identify specific study strategies that may buffer the impact of academic stress on mental health outcomes (Richardson et al., 2012). Such understanding could inform the development of more effective support services and interventions within higher education institutions.

There are some of the most important gaps in the current knowledge. There has been little research on the three-way interactions between these variables; most studies have concentrated on the bilateral links between academic stress and mental health or between study habits and academic success. Furthermore, there is a lack of comprehensive theoretical frameworks explaining the mediating mechanisms through which study habits might modify stress responses and influence psychological outcomes. Methodological limitation, including the predominance of cross-sectional studies and inconsistent operationalization of key variables, have also hindered deeper understanding of these relationships.

This research holds significant theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, it contributes to the development of integrated models explaining stress-habit-wellbeing interactions and extends existing theories of academic stress and coping. Practically, findings will inform the design of student support services, guide academic counseling programs,

support the development of early intervention strategies. For educational institutions, this research provides valuable insights for policy development and resource allocation decision. The study also has broader social significance in contributing to mental health advocacy and promoting educational excellence.

The scope of this investigation encompasses undergraduate and graduate students across multiple academic discipline and years of study. It considers various dimensions of academic stress, categories of study habits, and indicators of mental wellbeing. While the study acknowledges certain limitations, including geographical constraints and methodological boundaries, it aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how study habits mediate the relationship between academic stress and mental wellbeing.

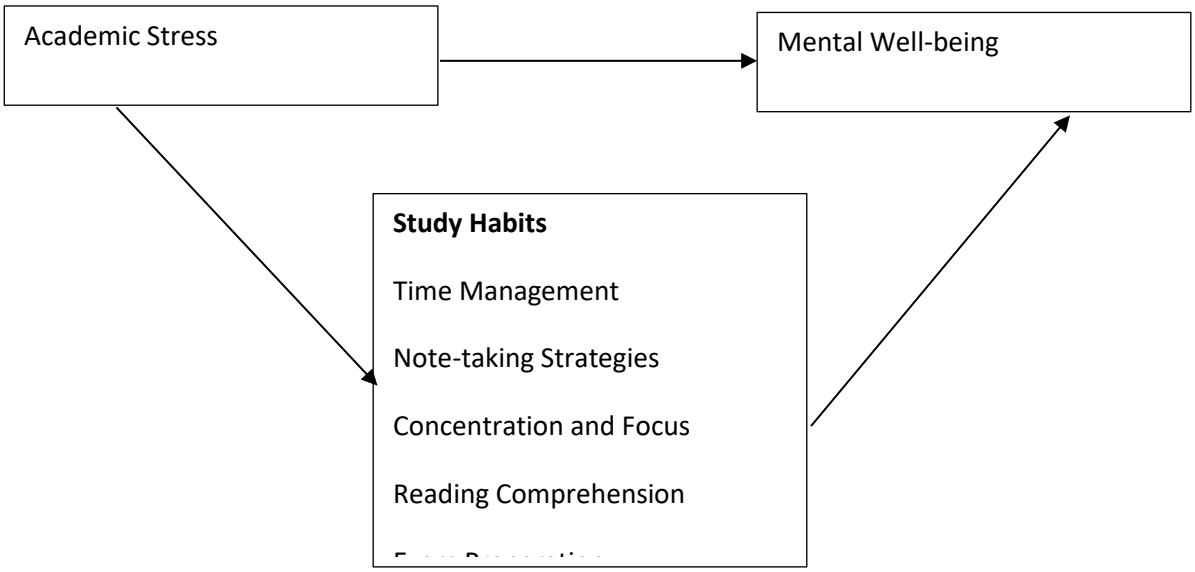
The academic stress is a serious challenge among the students irrespective of their age. It is also able to damage their emotional and physical well-being, education achievements and overall well-being. Research shows the existence of a correlation between academic stress, mental wellness, academic coping and study habits. Students with much academic pressure are likely to acquire mental health problems such as anxiety and depression. There is also a higher likelihood that they will utilize academic coping techniques that are non-effective such as procrastinating and avoiding. Moreover, ineffective study practices tend to increase the chances of having academic burnout and psychological conditions in students with weak study behaviors.

The purpose of the study is to improve students, awareness of the problem of academic pressure and mental health. Academic stress has negative impacts on the mental and physical well-being of the students but many people are not aware of the same. This explanation will be used to raise awareness about this problem and encourage other people to do something with failing students.

The objective is to come up with practical no-nonsense ways of reducing academic stress and mental health among students. The following discussion will examine the latest studies regarding study stress and psychological wellbeing and identify effective methods of stress reduction and mental-health improvement of the students.

It is aimed at recommending to other groups of students and universities how they can assist those students faced with stresses and mental health problems. This overview will give suggestions to universities and other institutions on how to create an environment in which the pupils are supported and at the same time give them the resources and the support they need to accomplish.

Figure 1. Mediating Role of Study Habits between the relationship of Academic Stress and Mental Well-being



Following hypotheses were formulated in order to inquire the moderating role of Study habits:

H1: Academic stress will negatively predict mental well-being.

H2: Study habits will positively predict mental well-being.

H3: Study habits will positively mediate the relationship between academic stress and mental well-being.

Method

Sample: The target population for this study consist of graduate, undergraduate and postgraduate students from various academic disciplines. The study's participants were

conveniently sampled from a university setting, with a target sample size of 258 students.

Instruments.

Academic Stress Scale (ASS). The academic stress scale utilized in this research is a comprehensive 40-items. This instrument was developed based on foundational work by Kohn and Frazer (1986) and further refined for the university student population. Participants respond to each item on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1(Never) to 5 (Always). The instrument has demonstrated strong psychometric properties with internal consistency reliability (Cronbach's alpha) ranging from 0.82 to 0.89 for the subscales and 0.91 for overall scale.

Study Habits Inventory Scale (SHIS). The study habits inventory scale employed in this research is a 25-item assessment tool designed to measure student's study behaviors, practices, and techniques. Participants respond to each item on a 4 Likert Scale 1 (Rarely) to 4 (almost always), with higher scores indicating more effective study habits. The inventory has demonstrated good psychometric properties with internal consistency reliability (Cronbach's alpha) of 0.86 for overall scale.

Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (WEMWBS). Mental wellbeing was assessed using the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (Tennant et al., 2007). This is consist of 14-items. Participants respond on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (none of the time) to 5 (all of the time), with higher scores indicating better mental wellbeing. The WEMWBS has been demonstrated excellent psychometric properties with high internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha) of 0.89 to 0.91.

Procedure.

The data collection procedure began with obtaining ethical approval from the university's Research Ethics Committee, followed by initial contact with department heads and instructors to secure permission for student recruitment.Participants were approached in their department by the researcher. Data collection occurred during the middle of the academic semester to capture typical stress levels rather than periods of heightened stress such as final examinations.

Participants completed the questionnaires in a single session taking approximately 25-30 minutes, and a debriefing statement was provided upon completion.

Results

Certain statistical analyses were computed on the data including alpha reliabilities, correlations and mediation.

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of Sample of Study (N=258)

Variables	Boys *f* (%)	*Girls* *f* (%)	Total *f* (%)
Socio-economic status			
Low	17	6	23
Average	70	147	217
High	11	7	18
Total	98	160	258
Education			
Graduate	29	30	59
Undergraduate	61	117	178
Postgraduate	8	13	21
Total	98	160	258
Residence			
Rural	54	78	132
Urban	44	82	126
Total	98	160	258

Table 1 illustrates the frequency and percentages of the demographic variables in which 258 university students were included, with gender distribution of 98 boys (38%) and 160 girls (62%). Regarding socioeconomic status, the majority of 217 participants (84.1%) reported average socioeconomic status, while 23 participants (8.9%) reported low socioeconomic status

and 18 participants (7%) reported high socioeconomic status. In terms of education level, 178 undergraduate students (69%), 59 graduate students (22.9%) and 21 postgraduate students (8.1%) were participated. The sample was nearly divided between 132 rural (51.2%) and 126 urban (48.8%) residents.

Table 2

Correlational Matrix for all the Variables Used in the Study (N=258)

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1	-	.55**	.10	.45**	.41**	.81**	.44**	.36**
2		-	.11	.77**	.72**	.46**	.78**	.74**
3			-	.12	.09	.05	.17**	.03
4				-	.47**	.38**	.48**	.51**
5					-	.37**	.47**	.40**
6						-	.33**	.29**
7							-	.46**
8								-

Note. 1 = Academic stress ; 2 = study habit; 3 = mental wellbeing ; 4 = time management, 5= note-taking strategies, 6 = concentration and focus; 7 = reading comprehension; 8 = exam preparation.

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$.

Table 2 displays significant relationships between academic stress, study habits, mental wellbeing, and their respective dimensions. The results indicate a significant positive correlation between academic stress and study habits ($r = .55$, $p < .01$), suggesting that students experiencing higher level of academic stress tend to engage in more structured study behaviors. Mental wellbeing showed week positive correlation with both academic stress ($r = .10$, p = n.s) and study habits ($r = .11$, p = n.s), indicating that the relationship between psychological wellbeing and both academic stress and study behaviors is not direct or simple. Similarly, study habits showed strong positive correlations with its dimensions: time management ($r = .773$, $p < .01$), note-taking strategies ($r = .725$, $p < .01$), concentration and focus ($r = .466$, $p < .01$), reading comprehension ($r = .780$, $p < .01$), and exam preparation ($r = .743$, $p < .01$). when

examining cross-dimensional relationships, academic stress showed moderate positive correlations with all study habit dimensions, ranging from r = .36 to r = .45 (all p < .01). Time management demonstrated notable correlations with academic stress (ranging from .36, to r = .44, all p < .01).

Table 3

Mediating role of Study Habit between Academic Stress and Mental Wellbeing (N=258)

Variable	SE	β	ΔR^2	95% CL	
				LL	UL
Model 1					
Constant	1.16	37.89		35.61	40.17
Academic stress	.01	.55***	.31	.13	.19
Constant					
Academic stress	.02	.02	.01	-.02	.06
Study habit	.08	.09		-.06	.25
M0del 2					
Constant					
Academic stress	.01	.15	.04	.12	.18
Time management	.00	.45	.20	.02	.04
Note-taking strategies	.00	.41	.17	.02	.03
Concentration and focus	.00	.81***	.66	.11	.13
Reading comprehension	.00	.44	.19	.02	.04
Exam preparation	.00	.36	.13	.01	.03

Table 3 presents the results of mediation analyses conducted to examine whether study habits components mediate the relationship between academic stress and mental well-being. Two mediation models were tested using the PROCESS macro for SPSS: a simple mediation model with overall study habits as a single mediator, and a multiple mediation model examining six specific study habits components as simultaneous mediators. The first mediation analysis examined whether overall study habits mediate the relationship between academic stress and mental well-being. The results showed that academic stress significantly predicted study habits (b = 0.15, p < .001), with a large standardized effect (β = .55) and academic stress explaining 30.59% of the variance in study habits. However, study habits did not significantly predict mental well-being when controlling for academic stress (b = 0.09, p = .25). The direct effect of

academic stress on mental well-being was also non-significant (*b* = 0.01, *p* = .44), while the total effect was only marginally significant (*b* = 0.03, *p* = .09). Most importantly, the indirect effect through study habits was not significant (*b* = 0.01), indicating that overall study habits do not mediate the relationship between academic stress and mental well-being.

A more comprehensive analysis examined six study habits components as simultaneous mediators: time management, note-taking strategies, concentration and focus, reading comprehension, exam preparation, and overall study habits. Academic stress significantly predicted all study habits components, with the strongest relationship observed for concentration and focus (*b* = 0.121, *β* = .817, *p* < .001) and the weakest for exam preparation (*b* = 0.026, *β* = .368, *p* < .001). Time management (β = .454), note-taking strategies (*β* = .419), and reading comprehension (*β* = .442) showed moderate relationships with academic stress. When all mediators were included simultaneously in predicting mental well-being, only reading comprehension emerged as a significant predictor (*b* = 1.17, *p* = .023), while all other study habits components were non-significant predictors.

The direct effect of academic stress on mental well-being remained non-significant when all mediators were included (b = 0.034, SE = 0.036, t = 0.95, p = .345). The simple mediation model explained only 1.6% of the variance in mental well-being (R^2 = .016), while the multiple mediation model explained 4.7% of the variance (R^2 = .047), though this model was only marginally significant (F(7,250) = 1.76, p = .096).

Discussion

The present study yielded several unexpected findings that challenge prevailing assumptions about the relationships between academic stress, study habits, and mental well-being among university students. Contrary to our hypotheses, the results revealed that study habits do not serve as a comprehensive mediating factor between academic stress and mental well-being, with only reading comprehension strategies demonstrating a significant, albeit modest, mediating effect.

The finding that academic stress positively correlates with study habits ($r = .55$, $p < .01$) presents an intriguing paradox that warrants careful consideration. This relationship suggests that students experiencing higher levels of academic stress may actually engage in more structured study behaviors, potentially as a coping mechanism or adaptive response to academic demands. This finding aligns with stress inoculation theory, which posits that moderate levels of stress can motivate individuals to develop more effective coping strategies. However, the weak and non-significant relationship between these enhanced study habits and mental well-being ($r = .11$, $p = n.s.$) indicates that increased study behaviors may not necessarily translate into improved psychological outcomes.

The absence of a strong mediating effect for most study habit components challenges the widely held belief that good study habits serve as protective factors against academic stress. This finding suggests several possible explanations. First, the relationship between study habits and well-being may be more complex than previously theorized, potentially involving moderating variables such as personality traits, motivation levels, or stress tolerance. Second, the quality rather than quantity of study habits may be more crucial for mental well-being outcomes. Students may engage in more study behaviors under stress, but these behaviors might be driven by anxiety rather than effective learning strategies, thus failing to provide the expected psychological benefits.

The singular significance of reading comprehension as a mediator offers valuable insights into the differential effects of specific study strategies. Reading comprehension represents a higher-order cognitive skill that involves active engagement with material, critical thinking, and meaning-making processes. Unlike mechanical study behaviors such as time management or note-taking, reading comprehension requires deep cognitive processing that may provide students with a greater sense of mastery and control over their academic material. This sense of academic self-efficacy could serve as a buffer against the negative psychological effects of academic stress.

The weak correlations observed between the primary variables, particularly the non-significant relationship between academic stress and mental well-being ($r = .10$, $p = n.s.$), raise important

methodological questions. This finding contradicts extensive literature documenting the negative impact of academic stress on psychological well-being. Several factors may explain this discrepancy, including the timing of data collection (middle of semester rather than high-stress periods), the specific population studied, or potential measurement issues.

The cross-sectional design of this study limits our ability to establish causal relationships and understand the temporal dynamics of these variables. Academic stress, study habits, and mental well-being likely interact in complex, bidirectional ways over time. Longitudinal research designs would be better suited to capture these dynamic relationships and identify critical periods when interventions might be most effective.

Despite the limited mediating effects observed, these findings have important implications for student support services and educational interventions. The significant relationship between academic stress and increased study behaviors suggests that students are actively attempting to cope with academic pressures. However, the lack of corresponding improvements in mental well-being indicates that current coping strategies may be insufficient or misdirected.

Educational institutions should consider shifting focus from simply promoting more study behaviors to enhancing the quality and effectiveness of study strategies. Specifically, interventions targeting reading comprehension skills may offer the most promise for improving both academic outcomes and psychological well-being. Programs that teach students how to engage critically with academic material, extract meaning from complex texts, and integrate information across sources may provide both academic and psychological benefits.

The unexpected findings of this study highlight several important areas for future investigation. First, longitudinal studies are needed to understand how the relationships between academic stress, study habits, and mental well-being evolve over time. Such research could identify critical periods when interventions might be most effective and examine whether certain study habits become more or less beneficial as students' progress through their academic careers.

Second, research should explore potential moderating variables that might influence these relationships. Individual differences in personality traits, motivation, learning styles, and

cultural background may all affect how study habits mediate stress-wellbeing relationships. Understanding these moderating factors could help identify which students are most likely to benefit from different types of interventions.

This study provides important insights into the complex relationships between academic stress, study habits, and mental well-being among university students. While the findings challenge some common assumptions about the protective role of study habits, they also highlight the importance of specific cognitive strategies, particularly reading comprehension, in mediating stress-wellbeing relationships. These results suggest that educational interventions should focus on enhancing the quality rather than quantity of study behaviors and should be integrated with broader approaches to stress management and psychological well-being.

The limited variance explained by the mediation models (1.6-4.7%) indicates that other factors not examined in this study play crucial roles in determining how academic stress affects student well-being. Future research should continue to explore these complex relationships using diverse methodological approaches and theoretical frameworks to develop more comprehensive understanding of student stress and coping processes.

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