

Understanding Psychological Stress in College Student: A Qualitative Case Study of Xinyang Agricultural and Forestry University

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Abstract

In the high-level academic environment of higher education, students at Agricultural and Forestry University face unique stress. These stress factors stem from both the demanding nature of their specialized fields and the general pressures of college life. There remains a lack of in-depth understanding of the specific factors contributing to psychological stress among these students, which can significantly impede their academic performance and mental health. This study aims to identify the primary factors contributing to psychological stress among students at the Agricultural and Forestry University and to examine the effectiveness of existing support systems and coping mechanisms utilized by these students. This study employs a qualitative research approach, involving semi-structured interviews with a purposive sample of 6 students from the Agricultural and Forestry University. The research was conducted on campus, with data analysis following the principles of thematic analysis. The theoretical underpinning of the study is grounded in the transactional model of stress and coping.

Keywords: Psychological Stress, Psychological Education, Stressor, College Student, Agricultural and Forestry University

Introduction

The transition to university life presents a range of stressors for students, marked by the challenge of adapting to new academic demands, social changes, and often, a novel living environment. For students at Agricultural and Forestry University, these challenges are compounded by the rigorous nature of their specialized fields, which may involve stressors related to the practical aspects of their studies and future job uncertainty. Psychological stress in university students has been linked to various adverse outcomes, including decreased academic performance, mental health issues, and lower overall well-being. The extent of perceived stress among undergraduate students has been shown to be significant, with a notable percentage experiencing high levels of stress (Negi & Kaur, 2022). Moreover, the impact of such stress spans across cognitive, emotional, and physical dimensions, often necessitating institutional interventions (Kakkad, Patel, & Sharma, 2022). Agricultural and

forestry students face unique stressors associated with environmental and societal expectations. The psychological impact of these factors has been increasingly recognized in the context of campus life and education (Liu & Kang, 2023). With an increasing recognition of the multifactorial nature of student stress, this study endeavors to unravel the specific stressors at play within the Agricultural and Forestry University context. It also seeks to critically evaluate the adequacy and effectiveness of the support systems in place, striving to recommend improve students' resilience and enhance their academic journey.

Literature Review

In China, Study pressure, employment prospects are not optimistic, is the most common psychological problems in the long way of modern learning, directly affect the healthy growth of students. In the face of this situation, colleges and universities must strengthen mental health education, systematically analyze the relationship between educational theory and the implementation of educational behavior and improve the effectiveness of psychological education of college students with the help of modern hands, so that mental health education work should achieve better achievements in practice and develop toward a professional direction (Jiang, 2024). The psychological problems of students mainly manifest in emotional instability, lack of interest in learning, sensitivity in interpersonal relationships, anxiety, lack of confidence, and poor independence. These problems can be broadly categorized into: Psychological issues caused by academic pressure, Psychological issues arising from interpersonal relationships, Psychological issues due to emotional distress, Psychological issues related to job-hunting and employment. In recent years, the pressure of job-hunting and career selection among college students has been increasing. With the number of graduates rising each year and the limited availability of jobs that match their majors, the severe employment situation has caused them confusion and anxiety (Wang & Duan, 2024). Liu and Wang (2024), point out that, under the influence of various factors such as society, school, family and individual students, the employment pressure of college students is increasing, and the psychological problems of employment are becoming more and more obvious, which will have a great impact on the comprehensive development of students and the realization of social value (Liu & Wang, 2024). Moeller, Seehuus, and Peisch (2020), examined the protective role of emotional intelligence against depression, anxiety, and stress, underscoring the potential benefits of fostering emotional intelligence (EI) in students to improve their psychological well-being. Their study aligns with Ramón-Arbués et al. (2020), who also observed a moderate prevalence of mental health symptoms among college students, correlating them with variables like problematic Internet use, smoking, and low self-esteem. Their research parallels the findings of Karyotaki et al. (2020), who determined that stress from various life domains could significantly predict the occurrence of common mental disorders among college students, suggesting the potential for comprehensive stress management interventions. Zhang (2022), introduced a deep learning model to assess psychological stress, offering an innovative approach to identifying and addressing students' mental health issues. The application of advanced technology in detecting and managing stress presents a novel direction for college mental health services.

The complex construct of psychological stress among students has been extensively examined, with researchers striving to uncover its multifaceted nature. The body of work spanning the past four years has highlighted academic pressures, social dynamics, financial concerns, and personal expectations as primary contributors to student stress. Galleguillos et

al. (2023), postulate that academic demands significantly influence psychological well-being, mirroring findings from Liu et al. (2023), who bring attention to the interaction between perceived stress and depression, moderated by emotion regulation and psychological capital. This points to the internal strategies students employ to mitigate stress, in line with the overall academic consensus.

However, there is discourse on the differential impact of stressors. Suneja and Sinha (2023) observe that stress levels do not significantly differ with age among Indian college students, suggesting a ubiquitous experience of stress across this demographic. Conversely, Kassim (2023), attributes variations in perceived stress to individual characteristics like self-esteem and cognitive coping strategies, which might offer a framework for personalized support interventions. Wang (2023), diverges to consider the effects of external, situational factors such as the COVID-19 pandemic on student stress, linking increased stress levels to a higher incidence of suicidal tendencies. The pandemic's role as a stressor is a particular focus that has reshaped the understanding of student mental health dynamics. In evaluating support systems, Olivera et al. (2023), critically assess the influence of self-inflicted stress on mental health outcomes, advocating for adaptive support systems that acknowledge students' self-perceptions. Muluneh and Bejji (2024), states that psychological stress was significantly and positively associated with academic achievement. What's more, Sedigh et al. (2024) points out that reducing their psychological pressure will help improve their educational level.

Collectively, these studies underscore the importance of academic institutions recognizing the breadth of stress factors and the necessity of developing robust, accessible support and coping mechanisms. Future research should aim to bridge the gap between student needs and the support provided, with a focus on individual resilience and institutional responsibility.

Objective

The objectives of the study are to identify and discuss the primary factors contributing to psychological stress among students in Xinyang Agricultural and Forestry University

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative methodology, utilizing semi-structured interviews to delve deeply into the perspectives and experiences of students at Xinyang Agriculture and Forestry University, a premier institution in Henan Province, China, noted for its excellence in the agricultural and forestry sciences. The research aims to explore the psychological stress experiences among students within the Department of Psychology. To ensure the richness and relevance of the data collected, this study employs purposive sampling as its core methodological approach. Purposive sampling is particularly suited to qualitative research where the aim is to gain deep insights into specific phenomena rather than to generalize findings across populations. This approach allows for the selection of participants who have lived experiences and perspectives directly pertinent to the psychological stress factors under investigation (Campbell et al., 2020). Specifically, students within the Department of Psychology at Xinyang Agriculture and Forestry University were chosen due to their unique position at the intersection of rigorous academic pursuits and the inherent stresses of university life. Thus, the selection of six students is expected to allow for the in-depth exploration of their experiences and perspectives while ensuring manageability in data collection and analysis. This sample size also reflects a balance between depth of individual

experience and the practical considerations of qualitative research, where the richness of data takes precedence over quantity chosen a purposive sampling strategy, selecting participants who are most likely to provide insight into our research question. Adhering to specific criteria to ensure relevance and depth in the data collected. These criteria include: (1) enrollment in the psychology program, (2) status as a third or fourth-year student, and (3) a willingness to openly discuss personal experiences related to psychological stress within an interview context.

Student number	Academic Year	Gender
1	3	F
2	3	M
3	3	M
4	4	F
5	4	M
6	4	F

The research procedure involves conducting interviews in a setting that promotes comfort and openness, with each session lasting from 45 to 60 minutes. An interview guide, consisting of open-ended questions, will be utilized to encourage meaningful dialogue. To maintain consistency across the data collection and coding processes, a single researcher will conduct all interviews and handle the subsequent data analysis. All interviews will be audio-recorded, pending participant consent, and supplemented with field notes capturing non-verbal cues and contextual nuances. Ethical approval will be obtained from the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB). Prior to participation, all students will be provided with a consent form outlining the study's purpose, what their participation entails, confidentiality measures, and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Anonymity will be ensured by assigning pseudonyms to participants, and all data will be stored securely. Audio recordings will be transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic analysis. Transcripts will be read multiple times to facilitate familiarity with the data. Initial codes will be generated by identifying features of the data that are relevant to the research questions.

Interview Questions

Scholar(s)	Year	Item	Suggested Interview Questions
Vijay Mahadeorao Bhujade	2017	Academic stress, inefficiency in higher education programs	"Can you describe how academic demands and the structure of your program contribute to your stress levels?"
W. Yuan	2019	Stress sources: study, school, family, society	"What are the main sources of stress in your life, including study, school environment, family, and societal pressures?"
Debasis Bhattacharya and Shuvendu Dey	2013	Gender differences in stress perception	"Do you believe your gender affects how you experience and cope with stress, and if so, in what ways?"
C. Hurst, Lisa E. Baranik, Francis Daniel	2012	Relationship stressors	"How do relationships with family, peers, and faculty impact your stress levels?"
Glenn M. Calaguas	2012	Academic stressors	"Which academic stressors do you find most challenging, and how do they affect your daily life?"
David Robotham	2006	Longitudinal stress effects	"Have you noticed a change in your stress levels since starting university, and what factors do you believe have contributed to these changes?"
Q. Yuan	2008	Lifestyle and stress	"How does your lifestyle, including diet, exercise, and leisure activities, influence your psychological health and stress levels?"
Xueyu Wang, Chun Wang, Jian Wang	2019	Stress from graduation and job prospects	"How do concerns about graduation and future job prospects contribute to your current stress levels?"

Results and Discussion

In our qualitative case study of psychological stress in college students at Xinyang Agricultural and Forestry University, we found that multiple factors contribute significantly to students' psychological stress. The following are the results and discussion.

Academic Stress, Inefficiency in Higher Education Programs

This part highlights the pervasive issue of academic stress and inefficiency in higher education programs, as evidenced by the experiences of six students. These students uniformly report overwhelming pressure stemming from intense academic demands and a rigid program structure that includes a dense curriculum, strict deadlines, and compulsory extracurricular activities. This structure leaves little room for personal time, perpetuating a cycle of stress. The transition to self-directed study and the addition of thesis projects in later stages add layers of uncertainty and stress, especially as students prepare for the job market. These insights suggest that the high expectations and inflexible nature of these programs significantly contribute to students' stress levels, indicating a need for reevaluation of program structures and academic demands to better support student well-being and efficiency in higher education.

Table 1

Academic Stress, Inefficiency in Higher Education Programs

S1	S1: The academic demands of my program are intense. Balancing coursework with research projects often feels overwhelming, contributing significantly to my stress levels. The rigid structure, with back-to-back deadlines, leaves little room for personal time.
S2	S2: The intensity of the curriculum in my program directly impacts my stress levels. The expectation to engage in extracurricular activities for a well-rounded resume, on top of academic responsibilities, is overwhelming.
S3	S3: The academic demands are high, and the structure of our program, which includes numerous group projects and presentations, adds to the stress. It feels like there's always something due next.
S4	S4: As I approach the end of my program, academic demands have intensified, especially with the addition of a thesis project. The structure, which now includes more self-directed study, has been both liberating and stressful.
S5	S5: In this final year, the academic demands have peaked, especially with the need to finalize projects and prepare for the job market. The program's structure, requiring a balance between practical and theoretical work, adds a unique layer of stress.
S6	S6: The final year of my program is incredibly stressful due to the high academic demands, including a comprehensive research project. The expectation to independently manage this project, alongside other coursework, significantly contributes to my stress.

Table 1 shows the academic stress, inefficiency in higher education programs among S1, S2, S3, S4, S5 and S6. Drawing from the responses of six students on how academic demands and the structure of their program contribute to their stress levels, several key insights emerge. Notably, a central theme across all responses is the intense pressure from both the volume and nature of academic work required. This section breaks down the findings into coherent themes based on the interviews. Students unanimously reported that the high academic expectations, characterized by a dense curriculum and significant coursework, are overwhelming. The need to balance coursework with research projects, as mentioned by S1, exemplifies the academic strain experienced. A rigid course structure, including strict

deadlines and compulsory engagement in extracurricular activities for a more rounded profile, exacerbates stress levels. The structure's inflexibility, as highlighted by S2, places additional pressure on students, leaving minimal room for personal downtime. The continuous cycle of deadlines, group projects, and presentations, as mentioned by S3, creates a perpetuating stress environment. This ongoing cycle suggests a program structure that constantly pushes students to their limits. The transition towards more self-directed study in the later stages of the program, as seen in S4's experience, presents a dual-edged sword. While it offers freedom, it also introduces uncertainty and stress, particularly with the addition of a thesis project. Students in their final year, such as S5 and S6, face heightened stress due to the culmination of academic demands. The need to balance project finalization with job market preparation and the expectation to manage comprehensive projects independently mark significant stress points. The findings indicate that academic demands and the rigid structure of educational programs significantly contribute to students' stress levels.

Stress Sources: Study, School, Family, Society

This part outlines the primary sources of stress for students, as identified in a series of responses (S1-S6). These stressors are broadly categorized into four areas: study, school, family, and society. A common thread across all responses is the intense academic workload and the pressure to excel academically, which are further exacerbated by high expectations from both family and society. Students are not only expected to achieve high grades but also to balance their studies with other responsibilities, manage social lives, and prepare for a successful transition into professional life immediately after graduation. The societal expectation to succeed and the familial pressure to uphold or surpass legacy standards add significant personal stress. The text highlights the need for a comprehensive support system that addresses the academic, social, and familial aspects of student life to help manage these stressors effectively.

Table 2
Stress Sources: Study, School, Family, Society

S1	My main sources of stress include the heavy workload from my studies, pressure to excel academically, and societal expectations to balance school with other responsibilities. Family expectations also add to the pressure, pushing me to maintain high grades.
S2	Stress in my life mainly comes from academic pressures, the competitive school environment, and societal expectations to succeed. Family pressure to maintain a legacy or achieve beyond relatives adds another layer of stress.
S3	Main sources of stress include academic workload, maintaining a social life, and managing expectations from myself and my family. The pressure to excel in all areas is immense.
S4	My stress primarily stems from academic pressures, particularly the completion of my thesis, alongside concerns about post-graduation employment. Family expectations for success and societal pressures to secure a well-paying job right after graduation also contribute.
S5	The looming deadline for my final project, job search anxiety, and societal expectations to quickly transition from student to professional life are my main stressors. Additionally, family expectations for immediate success post-graduation amplify this stress.
S6	My main sources of stress include the pressure to complete my research project successfully, job search anxiety, and societal pressures related to post-graduation success. Family expectations for excellence add another layer of stress.

Table 2 shows the stress sources in study, school, family and society among S1, S2, S3, S4, S5 and S6. A consistent theme across all responses is the heavy academic workload, including the intense pressure to excel academically. This pressure is not only internal but also propagated by high family and societal expectations. It's evident that the drive to maintain high grades, manage ambitious projects like theses and final projects, alongside routine study demands, constitutes a significant source of stress. For societal expectations, there's a

palpable pressure from society to succeed academically and professionally, with a clear expectation to transition smoothly from academic life to a successful career. This societal blueprint for success nurtures an atmosphere of comparison and competition, particularly noted in the fears concerning post-graduation employment and the rush to enter professional life. Family expectations further compound the stress experienced by students. From the pressure to uphold family legacies to immediate success post-graduation, there's a recurring narrative of needing to meet or exceed familial standards, adding a personal dimension to the overarching academic and societal pressures. Attempting to balance a demanding academic schedule with a fulfilling social life also emerges as a significant stressor, complicating students' attempts to maintain personal well-being amidst their rigorous academic endeavors. The main sources of stress for students at Xinyang Agricultural and Forestry University are deeply intertwined with academic, societal, and familial expectations. The findings highlight the need for supportive measures that address not just the academic aspect of student life, but also the social and familial dimensions, nurturing a more holistic approach to managing student stress.

Gender Differences in Stress Perception

This part discusses the role of gender in the perception and management of stress among students, highlighting how societal expectations and gender norms significantly influence stress experiences. Interviews with students reveal that gender impacts stress in distinct ways: women report added pressure to excel both academically and domestically, facing expectations to manage multiple responsibilities smoothly. Men, on the other hand, describe societal pressures to appear strong and not show vulnerability, which complicates seeking help or expressing stress. This difference is rooted in traditional gender norms, with men experiencing stigma around seeking support, perceived as a sign of weakness. The findings suggest that gender-specific pressures contribute to stress, with societal expectations shaping how each gender experiences and copes with stress. This underscores the importance of adopting gender-sensitive approaches in mental health and stress management support for students, acknowledging the unique challenges faced by different genders in navigating societal expectations and pressures.

Table 3

Gender Differences in Stress Perception

S1	Yes, I believe gender plays a role in how I experience and manage stress. As a woman, I feel there's an added pressure to prove myself academically and professionally. Societal expectations to manage both academic and domestic spheres can be exhausting.
S2	In some ways, yes. As a male student, there's a societal expectation to not show vulnerability, which can make it challenging to seek help or express stress. This pressure to appear strong affects how I cope with stress.
S3	Gender does affect how I cope with stress; there's an unspoken rule that men should 'handle' their problems without showing vulnerability. This makes it harder to reach out for help when needed.
S4	Yes, I feel that being a woman influences how I'm expected to handle stress. There's an assumption that I should be able to juggle multiple responsibilities smoothly, but this expectation often overlooks the emotional toll it takes.
S5	While I believe stress affects everyone differently, societal norms about masculinity do influence how I'm expected to manage stress. There's a stigma around men seeking help or admitting to feeling overwhelmed, which can make coping more challenging.
S6	Yes, I believe gender influences my experience of stress, particularly in terms of societal expectations to balance professional aspirations with personal responsibilities. There's also an underlying pressure to prove myself in a predominantly male-dominated field.

Table 3 shows the gender differences in stress perception among S1, S2, S3, S4, S5 and S6. Based on the qualitative research method of interviews, the question "Do you believe your gender affects how you experience and cope with stress, and if so, in what ways?" elicited varied responses that underscore the significant impact of gender on stress perception and management among students. The synthesis of the interview responses reveals a common theme of societal expectations and gender norms substantially influence how individuals experience and cope with stress. As for societal expectations and pressure, both male and female students highlighted the role of societal expectations in shaping their stress experiences. Female students (S1 and S4) noted the dual pressure of excelling academically while also managing domestic responsibilities. Male students (S2, S3, and S5) discussed the societal expectation to not show vulnerability, which complicates their ability to seek help or express stress. On the other hand, gender norms and vulnerability show a recurring theme among male respondents (S2, S3, and S5) was the challenge of adhering to traditional masculinity norms, which discourage expressing vulnerability or admitting to feeling overwhelmed. This societal norm affects their stress coping mechanisms, often limiting their willingness or ability to seek support. As for balancing multiple responsibilities, female respondents (S1 and S4) specifically mentioned the expectation to smoothly juggle multiple responsibilities. This expectation not only adds to their stress but also often overlooks the emotional and physical toll such balancing acts can take. Influence on seeking Support also show the stigma around seeking help, particularly noted by male students (S2, S3, and S5), indicates a significant barrier to effective stress management. This stigma is rooted in gender norms that equate seeking help with weakness, particularly for men. The impact of gender on professional aspirations show one response (S5) highlighted how gender influences stress related to professional aspirations, especially in male-dominated fields. This indicates an added layer of stress for women striving to prove themselves in such environments. The interviews reveal that gender significantly impacts how students experience and manage stress, mediated by societal expectations and gender norms. While both genders face

pressures, the nature of these pressures varies, with women often juggling academic and domestic expectations and men facing stigma against expressing vulnerability. These findings underscore the need for gender-sensitive approaches in addressing and supporting mental health and stress management among students.

Relationship Stressors

This section explores the significant impact of relationships with family, peers, and faculty on stress levels among students, based on interviews with six individuals. These relationships are depicted as having a dual role: they can serve as a source of support, offering emotional sustenance, practical advice, and a sense of belonging that helps alleviate stress; or they can act as stressors, particularly when they involve high expectations or are part of a competitive academic environment. The findings highlight the crucial role of supportive relationships in stress management, with peer support being unanimously recognized for its importance in mitigating stress effects. Additionally, positive interactions with faculty are noted for helping balance out stress, especially those stemming from academic pressures. The competitive or unsupportive academic settings are pointed out as factors that can increase stress levels. This research underscores the complexity of social interactions within the academic sphere and their impact on student well-being, suggesting that enhancing supportive relationships within academic institutions could be a key strategy in managing student stress levels effectively.

Table 4

Relationship Stressors

S1	Relationships with my family and peers significantly impact my stress levels. Support from these groups can alleviate stress, but misunderstandings or conflicts can also exacerbate it. Positive faculty relationships, however, provide a valuable support system.
S2	My relationships with peers are crucial for managing stress; we share resources and support each other. Family expectations can be stressful, but positive feedback from faculty helps balance this out.
S3	Good relationships with family and friends act as a buffer against stress. However, a competitive or unsupportive academic environment can increase stress levels significantly.
S4	Supportive relationships with peers and mentors at university help mitigate stress, providing a sense of community and understanding. However, familial pressures can sometimes heighten stress by imposing unrealistic expectations.
S5	Positive relationships with family and peers are crucial for managing stress. They provide emotional support and practical advice. However, academic competition and pressure from faculty can sometimes increase stress.
S6	Supportive relationships with peers, family, and faculty play a vital role in managing my stress levels. These relationships provide a sense of belonging and support that is critical during stressful periods.

Table 4 shows the relationship stressors among S1, S2, S3, S4, S5 and S6. The interviews with six students reveal a consensus on the significant impact of relationships with family, peers, and faculty on their stress levels. These relationships play a dual role, acting both as sources of support that can alleviate stress and as potential stressors that can exacerbate it. The key findings from the interviews show that all six students highlighted the importance of supportive relationships in managing stress. Support from family, peers, and faculty provides a crucial buffer against stress, offering emotional support, practical advice, and a sense of belonging. Four students (S1, S2, S4, and S5) mentioned that while family support is essential, expectations from family members can also be a source of stress. These expectations often revolve around academic performance and future career prospects. The role of peers was

unanimously recognized as critical for stress management. Sharing resources, experiences, and mutual support helps mitigate the effects of stress. This sense of community among peers provides a valuable coping mechanism. Positive feedback and supportive relationships with faculty members were mentioned by four students (S1, S2, S4, and S6) as important factors that help balance out stress, particularly stress stemming from academic pressures. Three students (S3, S4, and S5) noted that the academic environment itself could influence stress levels. A competitive or unsupportive environment increases stress, whereas a nurturing academic atmosphere can reduce it. The qualitative analysis of the interviews indicates that the quality and nature of relationships within the academic and personal spheres significantly influence student stress levels. Supportive relationships act as a critical resource for stress management, providing emotional sustenance and practical support. This finding aligns with psychological theories that emphasize social support as a buffer against stress. However, the interviews also reveal that these relationships can become sources of stress, particularly when they involve high expectations or operate within a competitive academic context. The dual role of these relationships underscores the complexity of social interactions in the academic environment and their impact on student well-being. Moreover, the emphasis on peer support highlights the importance of a cohesive student community in mitigating the pressures associated with academic life. This suggests that interventions aimed at strengthening peer networks could be beneficial in reducing student stress. Finally, the positive role of faculty relationships in managing stress points to the potential for more personalized academic support systems. Faculty members who provide constructive feedback and show understanding of students' challenges can significantly alleviate stress related to academic performance and expectations. In conclusion, the findings suggest that enhancing supportive relationships within academic institutions could be a key strategy in managing student stress levels. This involves not only fostering strong peer networks but also encouraging positive familial interactions and creating a nurturing academic environment through supportive faculty relationships.

Academic Stressors

This part outlines the various academic stressors faced by students, as captured through interviews with six individuals. Key stressors include the challenges of time management and meeting deadlines, balancing high academic performance with extracurricular activities, managing coursework alongside personal commitments, and the pressures of producing high-quality thesis work or completing research projects under tight deadlines. These stressors lead to significant impacts on students' lives, causing anxiety, sleep disturbances, social isolation, mental health issues, burnout, and physical symptoms of stress such as headaches and fatigue. The struggle to maintain a high GPA while also fulfilling the expectations of future employers and securing a job post-graduation adds to the stress. The findings highlight the multifaceted nature of academic stress and its profound effects on students' daily lives and well-being, underscoring the need for effective strategies to manage these pressures.

Table 5

Academic Stressors

S1	Time management and meeting deadlines are the most challenging academic stressors for me. They affect my daily life by causing anxiety and sleep disturbances, making it hard to maintain a balanced lifestyle.
S2	The most challenging academic stressor is maintaining a high GPA while also participating in extracurriculars expected by future employers. This juggling act impacts my social life and mental health.
S3	Juggling coursework, extracurricular activities, and personal commitments is extremely stressful. It affects my ability to relax and recharge, leading to burnout.
S4	The most significant academic stressor for me is the pressure to produce high-quality thesis work. This not only affects my daily routine by consuming a large portion of my time but also impacts my sleep and anxiety levels.
S5	The pressure to excel in my final year projects and secure a job is overwhelming. It consumes most of my time, affecting not just my social life but also leading to physical symptoms of stress like headaches and fatigue.
S6	Completing my research project under tight deadlines while maintaining high academic standards is my most significant stressor. It affects not just my academic performance but also my mental health, leading to anxiety and sleep issues.

Table 5 shows the academic stressors among S1, S2, S3, S4, S5 and S6. The struggle with time management and meeting deadlines was cited as a significant stressor. It leads to anxiety and sleep disturbances, as noted by S1, affecting the ability to maintain a balanced lifestyle. The constant battle against the clock symbolizes a prevalent challenge in academic life. S2 pointed out the difficulty of balancing a high GPA while engaging in extracurricular activities. This dual expectation strains not just academic performance but also impairs social life and mental well-being, depicting the high stakes involved in securing post-graduation opportunities. The act of juggling coursework, extracurricular activities, and personal commitments was highlighted as extremely stressful by S3. It compromises the ability to relax and recharge, eventually leading to burnout, showcasing the exhaustive demand on students' time and energy. For S4, the pressure to produce high-quality thesis work stands out as the paramount academic stressor. This not only consumes a significant portion of daily routine but also aggravates sleep and anxiety, highlighting the intense focus on academic output. The challenge of completing a research project under tight deadlines, mentioned by S6, significantly impacts both academic performance and mental health, illustrating the intense academic expectations and their ramifications. In terms of final year project and job market preparation, the dual pressure of excelling in final year projects and securing employment, as mentioned by S5, dominates the final academic year. It notches up physical symptoms of stress, including headaches and fatigue, underscoring the transition stress from academia to professional life. These findings elucidate the multi-faceted nature of academic stress and its encompassing impact on students' daily lives. The recurring themes of time management, balancing academic and personal life, and the pressure of achieving high standards elucidate the critical areas where interventions could potentially alleviate student stress.

Longitudinal Stress Effects

This part highlights the longitudinal effects of stress experienced by university students, as illustrated through interviews with six individuals (S1-S6). It reveals a unanimous agreement

on the increase in stress levels since the start of university, primarily attributed to the significant transition from high school to a more independent and demanding university environment. Key stressors identified include the increased academic workload, higher academic expectations, and concerns about future career paths and securing employment post-graduation. The cumulative nature of academic pressures over the years, alongside uncertainties regarding career prospects, exacerbates stress levels. Students also noted the challenge of adapting to a more autonomous learning style and the need for effective time management and study skills. The findings suggest that addressing the multifaceted aspects of university-induced stress through targeted support can significantly enhance student well-being and academic success.

Table 6

Longitudinal Stress Effects

S1	Since starting university, my stress levels have increased notably. The transition from high school's structured environment to the more independent university setting, along with the higher academic expectations, has been challenging.
S2	There's been a noticeable increase in stress since starting university, mainly due to the transition to more independent learning and higher academic standards.
S3	My stress levels have escalated since starting university. The increased academic workload, along with the pressure to plan for the future, has contributed to this rise.
S4	Throughout my university years, I've noticed a gradual increase in stress levels, primarily due to the cumulative academic workload and the looming uncertainty about my future career path.
S5	There's been a noticeable increase in stress since I started university, primarily due to the cumulative effect of academic pressures and the added concern about my future career path.
S6	Since starting university, my stress levels have steadily increased, primarily due to the escalating academic workload and the pressure associated with securing a good position post-graduation.

Table 6 shows the longitudinal stress effects among S1, S2, S3, S4, S5 and S6. The interviews with six university students revealed a unanimous perception of increased stress levels since starting their university education. The key factors contributing to this increase in stress show that all six students highlighted the transition from high school to university as a significant stressor. This transition involves adapting to a more independent learning environment and coping with higher academic expectations. Five students (S1, S3, S4, S5, and S6) specifically mentioned the increased academic workload as a primary factor contributing to their heightened stress levels. The cumulative nature of this workload over their university years exacerbates the stress. Four students (S4, S5, S6, and indirectly S3) expressed concerns about the uncertainty surrounding their future career paths as a significant source of stress. This includes worries about securing a good position post-graduation and the overall competitiveness of the job market. S3 mentioned the pressure to plan for the future as a distinct factor contributing to stress, which encompasses both academic and career planning. The qualitative analysis of the student interviews suggests a clear pattern of increased stress levels due to the challenges associated with transitioning to and navigating through university life. The findings align with existing literature on student stress, emphasizing the impact of

academic demands and future career uncertainties on student well-being. The significant shift from the structured environment of high school to the more autonomous and demanding university setting requires students to develop new coping strategies. This adjustment period can be particularly stressful as students navigate academic and personal independence for the first time. The increased academic workload in university is a continuous source of stress, with its cumulative effect becoming more pronounced over time. This is compounded by higher academic standards and expectations, requiring significant time management and study skills. Concerns about future career paths and the pressure to secure employment post-graduation introduce an additional layer of stress. This is reflective of broader societal pressures and economic uncertainties that influence student anxieties about their professional futures. These findings underscore the need for comprehensive support services within universities, including academic advising, mental health counselling, and career planning resources.

Lifestyle and Stress

The part discusses the significant impact of lifestyle choices, such as diet, exercise, and leisure activities, on the psychological health and stress levels of university students, based on interviews with six individuals (S1-S6). It reveals a consensus among students that maintaining a healthy lifestyle is crucial for managing stress, yet challenging due to academic pressures and time constraints. Irregular eating habits and insufficient exercise were specifically noted for their negative effects on psychological health. Despite recognizing the importance of a balanced diet, regular physical activity, and engaging in hobbies for stress management and mental well-being, students reported difficulties in consistently integrating these practices into their daily lives. The struggle to find time for regular exercise and relaxation amidst academic demands was a common theme. Leisure activities, although essential for mental health, often take a backseat to academic responsibilities.

Table 7

Lifestyle and Stress

S1	My lifestyle choices, like irregular eating habits and insufficient exercise due to time constraints, negatively affect my psychological health and stress levels. However, engaging in leisure activities when possible does help reduce stress.
S2	Maintaining a healthy lifestyle is challenging but crucial for managing stress. Regular exercise and hobbies help me unwind, but there's always a struggle to find time for these activities.
S3	A balanced diet and regular exercise are crucial for managing stress, though it's hard to maintain these habits during busy periods. Leisure activities are essential for mental health but often take a backseat to academic responsibilities.
S4	A balanced lifestyle is crucial for managing stress. Engaging in regular physical activity and hobbies helps me maintain mental well-being. Neglecting these aspects can lead to increased anxiety and decreased productivity.
S5	Maintaining a healthy lifestyle, including regular exercise and hobbies, is vital for managing stress. These activities provide a necessary break from academic pressures and help maintain mental health.
S6	A healthy lifestyle is key to managing stress; however, finding the time for regular exercise and relaxation can be challenging amidst the demands of my final year. When I do manage it, I notice a significant improvement in my well-being.

Table 7 shows the lifestyle and stress among S1, S2, S3, S4, S5 and S6. The interviews with six university students reveal a strong consensus on the impact of lifestyle choices—specifically diet, exercise, and leisure activities—on their psychological health and stress levels. Key findings from the responses show that S1 irregular eating habits and insufficient exercise, often due to time constraints, negatively affect psychological health and stress levels. This suggests a direct correlation between lifestyle habits and mental well-being. Challenge in Maintaining a Healthy Lifestyle: All students acknowledged the importance of maintaining a healthy lifestyle for stress management but also noted the difficulty in doing so. S2 and S6 specifically mentioned the struggle to find time for regular exercise and hobbies amidst academic pressures. Importance of Regular Exercise and Hobbies: S2, S4, and S5 emphasized that regular physical activity and engaging in hobbies are crucial for unwinding and managing stress. These activities not only help in maintaining mental well-being but also in providing a necessary break from academic pressures. Balanced Diet and Exercise as Stress Management Tools: S3 pointed out that a balanced diet and regular exercise are essential for managing stress, though maintaining these habits can be challenging during busy periods. This indicates the recognition of the role of physical health in psychological well-being. Despite the challenges in maintaining a balanced lifestyle, there's a unanimous acknowledgment among the students that leisure activities play a vital role in mental health. S3 noted that these activities often take a backseat to academic responsibilities, highlighting a common conflict between academic demands and personal well-being. The qualitative analysis of student interviews underscores the critical role of lifestyle choices in influencing psychological health and stress levels among university students. The data suggests that while students recognize the importance of a healthy lifestyle, including diet, exercise, and leisure activities, in managing stress and promoting mental well-being, they face significant challenges in integrating these practices into their daily lives due to academic pressures and time constraints. This conflict between the recognition of what is beneficial for mental health and the practical difficulties in implementing these practices highlights a gap in students' lives that could potentially be addressed through university support services.

Stress from Graduation and Job Prospects

The significant stress university students face concerning graduation and future job prospects, as revealed through interviews with six individuals (S1-S6). A common theme among the responses is the pervasive uncertainty and anxiety about securing a job that aligns with one's degree and aspirations. This stress is compounded by the competitive nature of the job market, making it challenging for students to remain optimistic about their career paths post-graduation. Concerns are not only about finding a job but also about the job's alignment with career goals and financial stability. The pressure to secure employment immediately after graduation, fueled by societal and familial expectations, significantly contributes to students' stress levels. This analysis underscores the need for universities to enhance career counseling and support services, providing students with resources to navigate job search strategies, networking opportunities, and career planning. Addressing these concerns can help mitigate stress related to graduation and job prospects, fostering a supportive environment that encourages open discussions about career uncertainties.

Table 8

Stress from Graduation and Job Prospects

S1	Concerns about graduation and job prospects are a constant source of stress. The uncertainty of finding a job that aligns with my degree and aspirations contributes to my anxiety about the future.
S2	The anxiety about future job prospects and the pressure to secure employment post-graduation significantly contribute to my stress levels. It's a constant worry about whether my efforts will pay off in the long run.
S3	Anxiety about future job prospects and the pressure to succeed post-graduation are constant sources of stress. The uncertainty surrounding the job market only adds to this anxiety.
S4	Concerns about the job market and finding a position that aligns with my career goals are major sources of stress as graduation approaches. The competitive nature of job hunting exacerbates these concerns, making it difficult to remain optimistic at times.
S5	The uncertainty of the job market and how well I will transition into my professional life is a significant source of stress. The pressure to find a job that not only aligns with my career goals but also provides financial stability is daunting.
S6	The fear of what comes after graduation—whether I'll find a job in my field, how long it will take, and how it will impact my career trajectory—is a constant source of stress. The competitive nature of the job market only exacerbates these concerns.

Table 8 shows the stress from graduation and job prospects among S1, S2, S3, S4, S5 and S6. The interviews with six university students reveal a significant concern about graduation and future job prospects, which plays a substantial role in elevating their stress levels. The key findings from the responses can be summarized as follows: All six students expressed a sense of uncertainty and anxiety regarding their future job prospects and the alignment of potential job opportunities with their degrees and aspirations. This uncertainty is a constant source of stress. The pressure to secure employment immediately after graduation is highlighted as a significant stressor. Students are concerned about whether their efforts during university will translate into success in the job market. The competitive nature of the job market is cited by several students (S4, S5, and S6) as exacerbating their stress levels. This competition makes it challenging to remain optimistic about securing a position that aligns with their career goals. S5 specifically mentions the stress associated with finding a job that provides not only alignment with career goals but also financial stability, indicating the multifaceted nature of post-graduation anxieties. The qualitative analysis of student interviews underscores the profound impact of concerns about graduation and future job prospects on students' stress levels. This finding aligns with existing literature on the psychological effects of career uncertainty among university students, emphasizing the role of such uncertainties in contributing to heightened stress and anxiety. The pervasive uncertainty about future job prospects reflects broader economic and societal trends, including job market saturation in certain fields and the increasing requirements for entry-level positions. This uncertainty

directly impacts students' psychological well-being, contributing to anxiety about the future. The pressure to secure employment post-graduation is intensified by societal and familial expectations, as well as personal aspirations for success.

Summary of Results

The analysis of academic stress and inefficiency in higher education programs reveals a consistent theme of overwhelming pressure stemming from intense academic demands and rigid program structures. Six students highlighted the challenges of balancing coursework, research projects, and extracurricular activities, all contributing significantly to their stress levels. The dense curriculum and strict deadlines leave little room for personal time, perpetuating a cycle of stress. The transition to self-directed study and thesis projects in later stages introduces additional uncertainty and stress, particularly as students prepare for the job market. These findings indicate that high expectations and inflexible program structures are major contributors to student stress, suggesting a need for reevaluation to better support student well-being and efficiency in higher education (Galleguillos et al., Geronimo et al., Pascoe et al., 2023,2023,2020). The primary sources of stress for students are categorized into study, school, family, and societal expectations. Intense academic workloads and the pressure to excel academically are exacerbated by high expectations from family and society. Students are expected to maintain high grades, balance studies with other responsibilities, and prepare for professional life immediately after graduation. Societal expectations to succeed and familial pressures to uphold or surpass legacy standards add significant personal stress. Furthermore, gender differences play a role in stress perception, with women facing added pressure to excel academically and domestically, while men experience societal pressures to appear strong, complicating their ability to seek help or express stress. These insights highlight the need for comprehensive support systems that address academic, social, and familial aspects of student life (Casuso-Holgado et al., 2019).

Relationships with family, peers, and faculty play a dual role in student stress levels, acting both as sources of support and potential stressors. Positive interactions and support from these groups can alleviate stress, while misunderstandings or high expectations can exacerbate it. Peer support is crucial for managing stress, providing emotional sustenance and practical advice. Competitive or unsupportive academic environments can increase stress levels, highlighting the importance of a nurturing academic atmosphere. Additionally, maintaining a healthy lifestyle is recognized as crucial for managing stress, yet challenging due to academic pressures. Irregular eating habits and insufficient exercise negatively impact psychological health, while leisure activities, though essential for mental health, often take a backseat to academic responsibilities.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study reveals the multiple sources of stress faced by higher education students and their impacts on mental health and academic performance. Motivated by the increasing concerns over student well-being in higher education settings, this study sought to better understand the underlying stressors and their consequences. The findings highlight the urgent need for comprehensive support systems within universities to address these challenges. By identifying key stressors and their effects, this research makes a significant contribution to the growing body of literature on student mental health, providing valuable insights for educators, policymakers, mental health professionals, and university

administrators. It emphasizes the importance of targeted interventions to reduce stress, improve academic outcomes, and enhance overall student well-being. Future research should continue to explore the long-term effects of these interventions and validate their applicability across different educational environments and cultural contexts to develop comprehensive, evidence-based stress management strategies that can be adapted globally.(Jeong, 2022).

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