

The Relative Contribution of Both Self-esteem and Academic Achievement to the Prediction of Perceived Stress among University Students

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Received: 10/08/2024

Published: 25/04/2025

Abstract:

This study aimed to identify the relative contribution of both self-esteem and academic achievement in predicting perceived stress among university students, and to determine whether there are statistically significant differences in perceived stress attributable to the variable of gender. To achieve the study's objectives, the researcher administered a perceived stress scale and a self-esteem scale to a sample of 406 students from the University of Oran. The results indicated that there were no statistically significant differences in perceived stress attributable to gender, and that both self-esteem and academic achievement had a statistically significant contribution to the prediction of perceived stress.

Keywords: perceived stress; self-esteem; academic achievement; university student.

1. Introduction:

People are constantly striving to ease the burdens of life and achieve a sense of comfort that provides balance. With the complexity of life, increasing demands and the rapid pace of change, the pressures to keep up with these developments and to meet various needs have also increased. In fact, stress has become one of the most significant phenomena in the lives of most, if not all, of us. Everyone experiences some form of stress and expends considerable energy either coping with it or escaping from it.

Given that these pressures are unavoidable aspects of life for individuals of all ages, students, as one of the most important segments of society, are not immune to facing them and being affected by their consequences. Failure to cope with these pressures can lead to various psychological, physical and social problems.

The idea of developing a well-rounded personality in students - where they enjoy personal and social harmony and emotional balance - requires not only a serious

approach to this situation, but also a thorough understanding of certain psychological and academic variables and their role in guiding students' lives and enhancing their acquisition of knowledge and skills. Self-esteem and academic achievement, along with perceived stress, are among the essential variables that play a significant role in shaping a student's personality, enabling them to use all their energy and skills to achieve progress for themselves and their community. While stress is a hallmark of our times and a cause of many of the problems faced by individuals and society, experiencing it in moderation can motivate and energise individuals, enhancing their performance and resilience. This gives them the impetus they need to excel in managing stressors. Conversely, stress in its negative form represents a type of strain and discomfort that adversely affects an individual's psychological and physical well-being, performance and behaviour.

Self-esteem is defined by its ability to motivate individuals towards achievement, fulfilment and self-expression. It encourages engagement in activities that are meaningful and valuable to oneself and others, and leads individuals to invest and realise their full potential. This means that self-actualisation occurs when individuals engage in behaviours that are aligned with their defined goals (Al-Radhan & Al-Suwailah, 2014, p. 77). Studies confirm that individuals' beliefs about themselves significantly influence their perceptions of various facts and realities around them and shape their actions in many situations. These actions reflect their personal reality and that of those around them (Othman, 2010, p. 110).

Similarly, academic achievement reflects its significant role in the lives of individuals and their families. Its importance is not only evident in the successful progression through the successive stages of education and in the attainment of the grades that qualify them for promotion, but it also has very important aspects in the life of a pupil, as it is the obligatory route to the choice of their field of study and future profession. This, in turn, determines the social role they will play in the future and the social status they will achieve, which influences their self-perception, their sense of success and the level of their ambitions (Al-Hamwi, 2010, p. 176).

Therefore, there is a need to investigate the nature of the relationship between perceived psychological stress and both self-esteem and academic achievement among university students. This research may help them to achieve cognitive equilibrium and support their ability to adapt to the realities of their natural and social environments, thereby improving their learning outcomes.

2. Problem Statement

University life is a crucial stage in students' lives, and each phase of this journey requires further studies and research to explore the conditions and circumstances experienced by this group and their impact on psychological and social adjustment as well as academic performance. Given the nature of the factors associated with the transition to university,

which encompasses new experiences for students, and considering the specific demands of the university system regarding work and academic discipline, these factors can be seen as fundamental indicators highlighting the uniqueness of this student population, making it a suitable area for research and study. Mazé and Verlhac (2013) described the transition to university as highly stressful for students, as it presents them with numerous new situations that can be sources of pressure, compelling them to adopt various coping strategies. Factors such as separation from family, the search for a new network of relationships and friends, economic and environmental conditions, as well as academic demands and success, can all negatively influence a student's educational journey.

Since psychological stress is a concept intertwined with university life in its various forms and levels, it is appropriate to address some significant variables that may affect how students perceive and cope with these stressful situations, whether personal, social, or academic. This study thus aims to investigate the nature of these pressures in relation to variables that are equally important: self-esteem, as a fundamental factor in shaping an individual's personality and enhancing self-confidence, and academic achievement, as a crucial benchmark for excellence and success, serving as a basis for evaluating the quality of any academic activity. Based on the above, the current research problem can be defined by the following questions: What is the nature of the relationship between perceived psychological stress and both self-esteem and academic achievement among university students? Are there statistically significant differences in perceived psychological stress attributable to the variable of gender?

3. Hypotheses of the Study

1. There are statistically significant differences in perceived psychological stress attributable to the variable of gender.
2. There is a statistically significant correlation between perceived psychological stress and self-esteem among university students.
3. There is a statistically significant correlation between perceived psychological stress and academic achievement among university students.
4. Both self-esteem and academic achievement statistically significantly predict perceived psychological stress among university students.

4. Importance of the Study:

The significance of this study lies in understanding the reality of the pressures that students experience, in light of the adaptive demands imposed by university life, and the relationship between these pressures, self-esteem, and academic achievement. Additionally, the results of this study may be beneficial in providing academic services and developing psychological and guidance programs for this student population, based on the relationships among the study variables to help them better adapt to their realities.

The findings of this study may pave the way for researchers to conduct further studies in the same context.

5. Objectives of the Study:

This study aims to achieve the following objectives:

1. Investigate the significance of differences between genders (males and females) among university students regarding perceived psychological stress.
2. Identify the significance of the correlational relationship between perceived psychological stress and both self-esteem and academic achievement.
3. Explore the ability of both self-esteem and academic achievement to predict perceived psychological stress among university students.

6. Terms of the Study:

Perceived Psychological Stress:

Psychological stress is defined as “a set of situations, events, or thoughts that lead to feelings of tension, usually discerned from an individual’s perception that the demands placed on them exceed their capabilities” (Dukhan & Al-Hajjar, 2006, p. 372). Abdel Wahab (2022) defines perceived psychological stress as an individual’s awareness of a stressful event in their life, which interacts with the individual’s cognitive and psychological characteristics, thereby influencing how the individual perceives that event. In this study, perceived psychological stress is defined as a state of intensity and discomfort that affects an individual when they encounter events, conditions, and situations perceived as threatening and exceeding their abilities and resources to cope. It is operationally defined by the score obtained by the student on the Cohen et al. stress scale (Cohen et al., 1993).

Self-Esteem:

It is defined as “the evaluation that an individual makes regarding their self-image; thus, it reflects feelings of rejection and approval of their personality and attitudes toward it, indicating the extent to which an individual perceives themselves as successful and worthy of respect and appreciation” (Areebat & Al-Zaghlul, 2008, p. 43). It is also defined as the overall evaluation an individual makes of themselves, encompassing their mental, social, emotional, moral, and physical characteristics, which reflects in the individual’s confidence and feelings about themselves and their perceptions of their worth, merit, and expectations of themselves in various life situations (Shawamrah, 2014, p. 575). In this study, self-esteem is defined as an evaluative and emotional judgment adopted by the individual about themselves, which develops and continues through their interaction with the external world. It is operationally defined by the score obtained by the student on the Rosenberg self-esteem scale (Rosenberg, 1965).

Academic Achievement:

Abdel Majid (1995) defines it as reaching a certain level of competency in studies, reflecting and explaining the degree to which a student perceives their competence positively or negatively, determined by the objective achievement tests used (Al-Ghamdi, 2016, p. 38). In this study, academic achievement is defined as the amount of information a student acquires as a result of studying specific subjects in a particular manner. It is operationally defined in this study by the overall GPA obtained by the student at the end of the academic year.

7. Previous studies:

7.1 Arab studies:

Madjli Study (2011). This study aimed to investigate the level of psychological stress among students at the College of Education in Saada, University of Omran, in addition to investigating the significance of gender differences in the level of psychological stress. The sample consisted of 300 male and female students who were administered the psychological stress scale developed by Al-Abadi (1995). The results showed moderate levels of stress for this group, as well as statistically significant differences in levels of psychological stress between students based on gender, in favour of females.

Al-Azmi study (2013): This study aimed to examine the relationship between quality of life and psychological stress in a sample of students at Kuwait University. The sample included 318 male and female students who completed Abdul Sattar's (2011) life problems and stress checklist and the World Health Organization's short quality of life scale. The results showed a statistically significant negative correlation between quality of life and psychological stress, as well as significant differences in psychological stress levels between students based on gender, in favour of females.

Al-Samadi Study (2015). This study aimed to identify the sources of psychological stress among university students and the strategies used to cope with it. The sample consisted of 285 male and female students from the World Islamic Sciences University. The results indicated that these students experienced high levels of psychological stress based on the total score indicators of the stress sources scale. The results also showed that cognitive strategies were the most commonly used coping strategies, and there were no statistically significant differences in psychological stress levels attributable to gender.

Al-Ghamdi Study (2016): This study aimed to examine the relationship between psychological stress and academic performance among a sample of Saudi students studying at the University of Oregon in the United States, as well as the significance of gender differences in psychological stress. The sample included 170 students who were administered the psychological stress scale developed by the researcher. The results showed a statistically significant negative correlation between psychological distress and academic achievement, as well as differences in psychological distress between students with low and high academic achievement, favouring those with low achievement. In

addition, the results showed no statistically significant gender differences in psychological distress.

7.2 Foreign Studies:

Ilyas et al. (2011): This study aimed to explore the relationship between psychological stress and academic achievement among students from various disciplines at Putra University in Malaysia. The sample consisted of 376 students. The results indicated a statistically significant negative correlation between students' psychological stress and their academic achievement.

Farhan & Khan (2015): This study aimed to assess the impact of self-esteem, psychological stress, and gender on the academic performance of students at private universities in Pakistan. The sample comprised 300 students who completed the Rosenberg self-esteem scale and the Cohen psychological stress scale. The results revealed a statistically significant negative correlation between self-esteem and psychological stress. Additionally, the findings showed no statistically significant correlation between either self-esteem and academic performance or psychological stress and academic performance, indicating that neither self-esteem nor psychological stress had an impact on academic performance.

Azila-Gbettor et al. (2015): This study aimed to investigate the impact of sources of psychological stress on academic performance among business students, as well as to test for significant differences between genders in psychological stress. The sample included 375 students. The results showed statistically significant differences between genders in psychological stress and academic stressors, time pressure, and personal/social relationship stressors, favoring males. The findings also indicated no statistically significant correlation between academic performance and psychological stress or between academic performance and all sources of psychological stress (academic stress, time pressure, personal/social relationship stress, quality of teaching, relationships with teachers, teacher support, environmental stress, university administration, commuting), except for personal and self-related stress, which were statistically significantly correlated with academic performance.

Moksnes et al. (2016): This study aimed to examine the relationship between self-esteem, psychological stress, and symptoms of depression among Norwegian adolescents, in addition to testing differences in study variables according to gender and age. The sample consisted of 1,239 individuals. The results revealed a statistically significant negative correlation between self-esteem and all dimensions of psychological stress for both males and females. Furthermore, there were statistically significant differences between genders in self-esteem, favoring males, and significant differences in dimensions of psychological stress (peer pressure, family life, study persistence, study/leisure conflict, academic performance) favoring females.

The review of this collection of previous studies, which we deemed relevant to the current study, provided insights into psychological stress and some related factors. It contributed to developing an understanding of the nature of the study variables and how they will be addressed within the context of this research. We considered these studies to be guiding for the current research due to their focus on similar samples of university students and their methodologies used to explore their objectives. Additionally, these studies significantly shaped our ideas regarding the nature and types of appropriate tools for the current study and how to effectively use them for data collection.

8. Methodological Procedures of the Study

8.1 Study Methodology

Based on the nature of the current study and the requirements for collecting and processing information and data, the descriptive method was adopted as it is the most suitable approach for addressing the posed problem. This method mandates precise methodological steps to achieve scientific and objective results.

8.2 Study Sample

The study sample included 406 male and female students from the University of Oran, with an average age of 20.36 years and a standard deviation of 0.77 years. The following is a clarification of the distribution of the study sample according to the gender variable.

Table 1: Distribution of the Study Sample by Gender Variable.

| Gender | Frequency | Percentage |
|-----------|-----------|------------|
| Male | 288 | %69.23 |
| Female | 118 | %30.77 |
| Frequency | 406 | %100 |

It is evident from Table 1 that the majority of the sample consisted of males, with their number reaching 288, which corresponds to 69.23%, compared to females, whose percentage was 30.77%

8.3 Study Tools

First: Psychological Stress Scale:

The researchers relied on the Perceived Psychological Stress Scale developed by Cohen et al. (1993). The items in the scale ask respondents about their feelings and thoughts over the past month. For each item, they are required to indicate how often they felt or thought about the situation described. Responses involve marking the answer option that seems to provide a reasonable assessment of their condition. The response options are categorized as (Never, Rarely, Sometimes, Often, Very Often). The scale consists of fourteen items, seven of which are positively worded, scoring four points for "Never," three points for "Rarely," two points for "Sometimes," one point for "Often," and zero

points for “Very Often.” The seven items that are negatively worded are scored in reverse. Thus, the total score on the scale ranges from 0 to 56.

The validity of the scale was confirmed using two methods. The first was the content validity (judges’ validity), where the scale was presented to a number of judges who are professors in psychology and educational sciences. Each judge provided feedback on the clarity of the phrasing and the appropriateness of each statement for measuring its intended purpose, along with any modifications or suggestions they deemed suitable to enhance the scale. Based on the judges’ feedback, some statements were revised to align with the current study. The second method was construct validity, calculated by determining the correlation coefficient between the scores of the items on the Perceived Psychological Stress Scale and the total score after administering it to a pilot sample of 32 students. The results showed that all items on the scale were positively and significantly correlated with the total score, with correlation coefficients ranging from 0.75 to 0.51, which are statistically significant at a significance level of 0.01. These results indicate the scale’s validity.

As for the reliability of the scale, in this study it was confirmed by internal consistency by calculating Cronbach’s alpha on the scores of the aforementioned pilot sample, which gave a value of 0.82. This result indicates the reliability of the scale.

Second: Self-Esteem Scale:

The researchers relied on the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965), which is named after its developer. This scale is designed using a four-point Likert format with the following response options: Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree, and Strongly Disagree. The scale consists of 10 items that measure general self-evaluation, five of which are positively worded, scoring four points for “Strongly Agree,” three points for “Agree,” two points for “Disagree,” and one point for “Strongly Disagree.” The other five items are negatively worded and are scored in reverse. Consequently, the total score on the scale ranges from 1 to 40.

The validity of the scale was confirmed using two methods. The first was construct validity, calculated by determining the correlation coefficient between the scores of the items on the Self-Esteem Scale and the total score after administering it to the aforementioned pilot sample. The results showed that all items on the scale were positively and significantly correlated with the total score, with correlation coefficients ranging from 0.72 to 0.44, which are statistically significant at a significance level of 0.01. The second method involved extracting the concurrent validity index by calculating the correlation coefficient between the scores of the pilot sample on the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale and their scores on the Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory, yielding a correlation coefficient of 0.59, which is a positive and statistically significant value at the 0.01 level. These results indicate the scale’s validity.

As for the reliability of the scale, in this study it was confirmed by means of internal consistency by calculating Cronbach’s alpha on the scores of the aforementioned pilot sample, which yielded a value of 0.73. This result indicates the reliability of the scale.

9. Study results and discussion:

Hypothesis One: The first hypothesis was that there would be statistically significant differences in perceived psychological distress attributable to the gender variable. To test this hypothesis, t-test scores were calculated for two independent groups to determine the significance of the differences between genders (male and female) in perceived psychological distress. The results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Differences between men and women in psychological stress using t-test significance

| Variables | Frequency | Mean | Standard deviation | T value | Significance level | Evaluation |
|-----------|-----------|--------|--------------------|---------|--------------------|-----------------|
| Males | 288 | 40.938 | 7.718 | -0.265 | 0.791 | Not significant |
| Females | 118 | 41.169 | 7.616 | | | |

It is evident from Table 2 that there are no statistically significant differences between males and females in perceived psychological stress, with a t-value of 0.265, which is not statistically significant. This indicates that the sample members of both genders are similar in their overall levels of stress and their perception of it. This result reinforces the notion that psychological stress is a common and inevitable phenomenon associated with human life, placing individuals in various situations that require adjustment or readjustment. Everyone experiences stress, regardless of gender.

We can attribute this result among university students to the principles of higher education that establish gender equality as a foundation for achieving its goals. This necessitates that all stakeholders in the sector avoid discrimination in dealing with students of both genders. This can be reflected in the equal rights and obligations of all students, as well as the similar environmental conditions experienced by university students of both genders. Such factors may produce comparable effects on these students, leading to a similar perception of the threats arising from these stressors. The findings are consistent with the results of the Al-Samadi (2015) study and the Al-Ghamdi (2016) study.

Hypothesis Two:

The second hypothesis stated that there is a statistically significant correlation between perceived psychological stress and self-esteem among university students. To test this hypothesis, the correlation coefficient (r) was calculated between the scores of the

perceived psychological stress scale and the self-esteem scale for the research sample. Table 3 shows the results obtained.

Table 3: Correlation Coefficients Between Perceived Psychological Stress and Self-Esteem.

| Variables | Self esteem | Significance | Evaluation |
|--------------------------------|-------------|--------------|-------------|
| Precieved psychological Stress | 0,396- | 0.000 | Significant |

The results presented in table 3 indicate a negative correlation between perceived psychological stress and self-esteem, with a correlation coefficient of -0.396, which is statistically significant at the 0.01 level. This means that as self-esteem increases among students, their levels of perceived psychological stress decrease.

We can attribute this finding to the intensity and suffering that psychological stress inflicts on individuals in general and on students in particular, especially as they adapt to the changes and difficult, frustrating circumstances they face. The accumulation of these experiences affects their psychological and physical well-being, and self-esteem plays a significant role in this context. Self-esteem is crucial within the psychological framework of individuals, as it is foundational to personality development and the essence of their ability to cope with reality.

Abdel Azim and Abdel Azim (2006) note that low self-esteem causes students to feel anxious and fearful when faced with stressful situations, while higher self-esteem enables them to better confront and challenge stressful stimuli. Additionally, Al-Rashidi and Al-Urj (2022) explain that an individual’s awareness of their self and personality, including their strengths and weaknesses, as well as their ability to evaluate and appreciate their qualities, constitutes one of the most essential factors for success. This understanding allows individuals to adeptly navigate changes and surrounding circumstances, helping them overcome failures and acquire new strategies that enhance their experiences for future challenges.

The result aligns with the findings of the Farhan and Khan (2015) study and the Moksnes et al. (2016) study.

Hypothesis Three:

The third hypothesis stated that there is a statistically significant correlation between psychological stress and academic achievement among university students. To test this hypothesis, the correlation coefficient (r) was calculated between the scores of the perceived psychological stress scale and students’ final grades at the end of the academic year. Table 4 shows the results obtained.

Table 4: Correlation Coefficients Between Perceived Psychological Stress and Academic Achievement.

| Variables | Academic achievement | Significance | Evaluation |
|--------------------------------|----------------------|--------------|-------------|
| Precieved psychological Stress | 0,183 - | 0.001 | Significant |

The results presented in Table 4 indicate a statistically significant negative correlation between perceived psychological stress and academic achievement among university students. This means that as the level of perceived psychological stress among the study sample increases, their academic performance decreases.

We can explain this finding by considering the stressful events and situations that students encounter, which they perceive as threats to their well-being and which exceed their ability to cope. This often leads to feelings of frustration and various psychological and physical disorders, which can hinder their ability to achieve many of their goals and aspirations. As a result, their competitive drive and desire to excel and perform well may be dampened. The higher education phase imposes responsibilities and situations that may be unfamiliar to students, causing them anxiety and distress. If students are not able to adapt quickly to these situations and deal with them in a positive way, this could have a negative impact on their willingness to work hard and acquire the necessary knowledge and skills to complete their higher education studies. The new circumstances faced by university students are very different from those faced by secondary school students, which may put them under pressure and lead them to perceive these situations as beyond their ability to cope, thereby weakening their levels of achievement and performance. However, if students harness their energies and adopt effective strategies to manage and reduce the intensity of stressful situations, this will support their psychological and social adjustment and improve their performance levels.

This finding is consistent with the findings of Ilyas et al. (2011) and Al-Ghamdi (2016).

Hypothesis Four:

The fourth hypothesis stated that both self-esteem and academic achievement significantly predict perceived psychological stress among university students. To test this hypothesis, multiple regression analysis was used to determine the significance of the predictive equation for both self-esteem and academic achievement in predicting perceived psychological stress among university students. The results are presented in Table 5.

Table 5: Regression analysis of the predictor variables for perceived psychological stress.

| Dependent Variable | Predictor Variables | R ² | (F-value) | Beta Coefficient | Beta | (t-value) | Significance | Evaluation |
|---------------------------------|----------------------|----------------|-----------|------------------|-------|-----------|--------------|-------------|
| perceived psychological stress. | Constant value | 0.179 | 36.873 | 68.423 | | 20.402 | 0.00 | Significant |
| | Self esteem | | | -0.641 | 0.383 | 7.755 | 0.000 | Significant |
| | Academic achievement | | | -0.645 | 0.154 | 3.113 | 0.002 | Significant |

The results presented in Table 5 show the significance of the predictive value for perceived psychological distress based on the self-esteem and academic achievement variables, with an F-value of 36.873, which is statistically significant at the 0.01 level. The effect size indicates that the predictor variables account for 17.9% of the variance in the scores. Of these, self-esteem ranks first in terms of its contribution with 38.3%, followed by academic achievement with 15.4%.

The results demonstrate the statistically significant predictive ability of both self-esteem and academic achievement in relation to perceived psychological distress. This finding can be explained by Abdel Azim and Abdel Azim (2006), who included low self-esteem and low academic achievement as individual factors contributing to stress in this segment of society. They pointed out that students with low self-esteem are more susceptible to stress because they perceive themselves as incapable and unsuccessful and often see others around them as a source of fear and anxiety. In addition, low academic achievement may lead some students to become less engaged in their studies and more likely to experience distress, potentially leading to unacceptable behaviour and withdrawal from their studies.

Thus, self-esteem can influence how individuals respond to and cope with stressful situations. Shelley (2008) notes that high levels of self-esteem help to mitigate the effects of stress on an individual's health, as high or positive self-esteem is associated with lower levels of cortisol and adrenocorticotrophic hormone. This supports the proposal of a psychosocial cycle through which self-esteem affects susceptibility to stress-related illnesses.

Conversely, academic achievement can be seen as a significant source of psychological stress for students and a crucial factor in their sense of competence and ability. Poor grades and low levels of achievement foster students' fear of failure and often lead them to feel distressed about their situation. In contrast, higher academic achievement

increases students' self-confidence and equips them with the necessary skills to deal positively with stressful situations and to mitigate their consequences.

10. Conclusion:

Psychological stress is a concept inherent to human behaviour and reflects the pressing needs and demands that individuals strive to meet. Students, regardless of their level, are not immune to facing such stressors and the consequences that affect their psychological and academic realities. In this context, the present study aimed to investigate the nature of perceived psychological stress among university students and its relationship with both self-esteem and academic performance. The results showed no statistically significant differences in perceived psychological stress according to students' gender, and a statistically significant negative correlation between perceived psychological stress and both self-esteem and academic achievement. Furthermore, both self-esteem and academic achievement contributed in a statistically significant way to the prediction of perceived psychological stress among university students.

Based on the above findings, we can make some suggestions as follows:

1. Conduct further studies including as many available variables as possible to explore their relationships with perceived psychological distress and to assess their predictive ability, especially among similar student populations and other groups.
2. Propose interactive models based on the relationships between the study variables and test their validity, especially within this student population.

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