

## Gender Differences In Coping Strategies For Academic Stress Among Postgraduate Students In Universities In Bayelsa State

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### ABSTRACT

This study examined gender differences in coping strategies for academic stress among postgraduate students in universities in Bayelsa State. The study adopted a descriptive survey research design, with a population of 1,223 postgraduate students and a sample of 340 respondents selected through systematic sampling. Data were collected using a researcher-developed questionnaire titled *Gender and Coping Strategies for Academic Stress Questionnaire (GCSASQ)*, validated by experts in Educational Measurement and Evaluation and pilot-tested for reliability (Cronbach Alpha = 0.83). Descriptive statistics of mean and standard deviation were used to answer the research questions, while independent samples t-test was employed to test the hypothesis at a 0.05 level of significance. Findings revealed that male postgraduate students reported higher usage of coping strategies (mean = 2.56, SD = 1.13) compared to female students (mean = 1.87, SD = 0.82), indicating that males engage more frequently in a wider range of coping mechanisms. Both male and female students, however, showed reliance on maladaptive strategies such as suppression and behavioral disengagement. The t-test result ( $t = 6.38$ ,  $df = 338$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) confirmed a significant difference in coping strategies between male and female students. The study concluded that gender significantly affects coping strategy adoption and highlighted a general underutilization of effective coping mechanisms among postgraduate students. Based on the findings, it was recommended that universities develop gender-sensitive counselling programs, provide training on adaptive coping strategies, and strengthen institutional support systems to enhance students' stress management and academic resilience.

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**Keywords:** Gender Differences, Coping Strategies, Academic Stress, Postgraduate Students, Bayelsa State

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### INTRODUCTION

The influence of postgraduate students cannot be overemphasized in any tertiary institution; this is especially so in Bayelsa State where human capital development plays pivotal roles in its developmental agenda. Postgraduate students are presumed independent learners and researchers who can publish and remain academically active throughout their academic pursuit at postgraduate level. The reality is however far from this ideal, as these students also juggle pressing demands such as employment, marriage, financial responsibilities, and indigenous roles. When these academic and non-academic demands intersect, they lead to increased academic stress among postgraduate scholars, which calls for appraisal of how these scholars cope with stress (1). In Nigeria, many of these students also contend with erratic academic sessions and limited access to research funding, among other institutional challenges.

Academic stress can be very disturbing if not properly managed. It affects students' cognitive ability, emotional regulation, as well as their academic performance. Much research has shown the

association between chronic academic stress and anxiety, depression, burnout, and students dropping out of their graduate programmes (2,3). While previous studies have focused on identifying whether students experience stress and what predicts this stress, recent research is now concerned with how students cope with stress rather than merely documenting its presence. Coping has been defined as cognitive and behavioural efforts to manage demands perceived as taxing or exceeding the students' resources (4). Coping strategies can therefore be regarded as mediator variables that determine whether stress translates to poor mental health or greater resilience among Masters Scholars.

There are different types of coping strategies. Some coping strategies are considered adaptive, such as confronting problems directly, effective time management, and seeking instrumental or emotional support. Maladaptive coping strategies include avoidance, denial, excessive social media use, and alcohol consumption. Adaptive coping strategies have been positively correlated with better psychological adjustment and persistence in graduate school, while maladaptive coping strategies have

been found to heighten stress and lead to poor academic outcomes (5). However, students do not all cope in the same ways. Coping with stress is patterned by social influences. This suggests that students from different backgrounds may cope differently due to demographic factors and societal expectations. Thus, discussing coping without considering differences in students' demographics may oversimplify the phenomenon.

Gender socialization involves a set of expected roles and behaviours ascribed to male and female individuals. Males and females tend to cope differently with stress. Research has shown that females tend to use more emotion-focused coping strategies, such as seeking social and emotional support, while males lean toward problem-focused or avoidant coping strategies (6,1). However, these studies have faced criticism. Some researchers argue that both males and females experience similar levels of stress and may prefer similar coping strategies, but males are often more distressed by emotional expression due to socialization patterns (7). Avoidant coping may be normative for male students in contexts where emotional expression is discouraged, while females may seek emotional support because they are socially permitted to express vulnerability.

Although this may hold true in many societies, there may be gender differences in coping among postgraduate scholars in Bayelsa State. Female postgraduate scholars may deal with academic stress alongside marital responsibilities and motherhood, while male postgraduate scholars may experience pressure related to family provision and career security. However, no existing study has examined coping differences between male and female Masters Scholars in Bayelsa State. Some studies conducted in Nigeria focused primarily on undergraduate students (8), while others treated postgraduate students as a homogeneous group. Thus, no study has established whether female and male Masters Scholars in Bayelsa State differ significantly in their coping strategies.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Postgraduate education all over the world has been linked with severe psychological distress, and stress-related illness now ranks among major threats to academic progress and programme completion (2). Many factors contribute to this high level of stress among graduate students, including intensive research demands, pressure to publish, financial constraints, and uncertainty about career prospects after graduation. The World Health Organization identified stress as a leading factor responsible for poor mental health globally (9), and university students are not exempt from this reality. In Nigeria, and particularly in Bayelsa State, many students experience academic stress due to the highly

demanding nature of postgraduate education. Moreover, Nigerian tertiary institutions are often ill-equipped to adequately address students' psychological needs. These challenges include unstable academic calendars, compulsory self-funded courses, financial burdens, and graduates who may feel inadequately prepared for the labour market (10). Studies examining academic stress among university students have increased in recent years. However, most of these studies focus primarily on documenting prevalence rates and psychological effects of stress. Few studies have examined how students respond to stress, and even fewer have specifically investigated coping strategies among postgraduate students. There is particularly scant research exploring whether male and female Masters Scholars in Nigeria differ in how they cope with academic stress. Coping strategies serve as mediators between stress and psychological outcomes among students (4). Failure to acknowledge possible gender differences may result in a one-size-fits-all institutional approach to stress management. Although it has been established that male and female students may differ in their coping strategies (6), it cannot automatically be assumed that such differences exist among postgraduate scholars in Bayelsa State without empirical investigation.

### **Empirical Review**

Empirical studies on academic stress consistently show that postgraduate students experience high levels of psychological strain, yet findings on how they cope, particularly across gender, remain inconclusive. Elevated rates of anxiety and depression have been reported among graduate students, with coping mechanisms identified as significant moderators of these outcomes (2). Similarly, students who adopt problem-focused and support-seeking strategies demonstrate better academic adjustment than those relying on avoidance strategies (3). However, research examining gender differences presents mixed results. Female students have been found to employ more emotion-focused coping strategies, including seeking social support, whereas male students show greater tendencies toward problem-focused or avoidant coping (6). In contrast, some scholars argue that gender differences in coping are often overstated and largely shaped by contextual and cultural expectations rather than inherent psychological distinctions (7). Within the Nigerian context, observable gender-based variations in stress responses among university students have been documented (11), although that study focused primarily on undergraduates and did not specifically address postgraduate populations.

These divergent findings underscore the need for localized empirical inquiry into whether male and female postgraduate students in Bayelsa State differ significantly in their coping strategies for academic stress. Thus, the research question is: What are the

prevalent coping strategies adopted by male and female postgraduate students for academic stress in universities in Bayelsa State?

Further empirical evidence suggests that the effectiveness of coping strategies may not only vary by gender but may also produce differential academic and psychological outcomes. It has been reported that female students' reliance on emotional support networks often enhances psychological wellbeing, whereas some male students' tendency toward emotional suppression increases vulnerability to maladaptive coping (8). Conversely, problem-focused coping, more frequently reported among males, has been associated with improved academic task completion and performance (5). Such inconsistencies highlight the complexity of gendered coping patterns and caution against universal assumptions. Moreover, few studies within Nigerian universities, particularly in Bayelsa State, have systematically compared male and female postgraduate students' coping strategies using empirical data. Without such comparative evidence, institutional counselling interventions risk being generalized rather than gender-responsive. Consequently, it becomes necessary to critically examine whether statistically significant differences exist in the coping strategies of male and female postgraduate students in universities in Bayelsa State. Thus, the research question is: Is there a significant difference in the coping strategies adopted by male and female postgraduate students for academic stress in universities in Bayelsa State?

**Research Methods**

This study was conducted using descriptive survey research design. Descriptive survey design can be used where researchers want to take representative samples to collect information for the purpose of describing the current status and recognize trends or patterns within a chosen population (12). The descriptive survey was adopted for the study because the study was intended to investigate coping strategies postgraduate students used in dealing with academic stress without any form of manipulation. The population that was studied consisted of 1223 postgraduate students from universities purposively selected in Bayelsa State. Sample size was 340 postgraduate students that were selected from the population. The sampling technique used was systematic sampling technique. Respondents were selected by picking students with odd-numbered serial numbers from the postgraduate students' admission register of the selected universities until the sample size was reached. Respondents were selected using this technique because it gave every student equal opportunity of being selected which rule out bias and the sample was still representative of the population. The instrument used for data collection in the study was questionnaire entitled

“Gender and Coping Strategies for Academic Stress Questionnaire (GCSASQ)” that was developed by the researcher. Section A consisted of items that were intended to solicit demographic information such as gender and other background variables of respondents. Section B consisted of twenty (20) items that were intended to solicit information on coping strategies students adopted in dealing with academic stress they faced as postgraduate students. Four-points likert scale was used and scoring was keyed: Used Often (UO = 4), Moderately Used (MU = 3), Rarely Used (RU = 2) and Not Used at All (NUAA) = 1.

Two Educational Measurement and Evaluation experts from the Faculty of Education Niger Delta University read through the instrument and validated it for face validity, content validity and construct validity. Adjustments requested by the validators were incorporated into the instrument. Ten postgraduate students that were outside the study population were used for the pilot study of the instrument and reliability of the instrument was determined using Cronbach Alpha reliability method because items on the instrument were polychotomously scored. The reliability coefficient obtained was 0.83 which implied that the instrument had a high degree of internal consistency. Researcher administered questionnaire on respondents in the selected universities assisted by two research assistants that were trained on how to administer the questionnaire. Each selected student was met one-on-one, informed about the study and each student was assured of confidentiality. They were then requested to fill the questionnaire. Administrator ensured that students had no problem with filling the questionnaire and a high return of the instrument was achieved. Collected data were coded and analyzed using mean and standard deviation to answer the research questions. Hypotheses were tested using independent samples t-test at 0.05 level of significance. A cut-off point (critical) means point score of 2.50 was used as a guide to interpret the mean score for each item statements responded by the students. Items mean scores that were  $\geq 2.50$  were interpreted as High Usage while mean scores that were  $< 2.50$  were interpreted as Low Usage.

**RESULTS**

**Research Question 1**

What are the prevalent coping strategies adopted by male postgraduate students in universities in Bayelsa State?

Table 1: Mean and Standard deviation of respondents for research question 1

Gender	N	Mean	SD
Male	179	2.56	1.13
Female	161	1.87	.82

Source: Fieldwork (2026)

Table 1 above shows the mean and standard deviation of male postgraduate students on the prevalent coping strategies adopted for managing academic stress in universities in Bayelsa State. The table revealed that male postgraduate students (N = 179) obtained a mean score of 2.56 with a standard deviation of 1.13. Since the mean score of 2.56 is above the benchmark of 2.50, it indicates that male postgraduate students demonstrate a high level of usage of coping strategies in managing academic stress. The standard deviation of 1.13 suggests a moderate spread in responses, implying some variability in the coping strategies adopted among male postgraduate students.

**Research Question 2**

What are the prevalent coping strategies adopted by female postgraduate students in universities in Bayelsa State?

Table 1 above shows the mean and standard deviation of female postgraduate students on the prevalent coping strategies adopted for managing academic stress in universities in Bayelsa State. The table revealed that female postgraduate students (N = 161) obtained a mean score of 1.87 with a standard deviation of 0.82. Since the mean score of 1.87 is below the benchmark of 2.50, it indicates that female postgraduate students demonstrate a low level of usage of coping strategies in managing academic stress. The standard deviation of 0.82 suggests a relatively closer clustering of responses, indicating less variability in the coping strategies adopted among female postgraduate students.

**Research Question 3**

What are the differences in the prevalent coping strategies among postgraduate students in universities in Bayelsa State based on gender?

Table 2: Mean and Standard deviation on the differences in the prevalent coping strategies among postgraduate students in universities in Bayelsa State based on gender

S/N	Items Statements	Male N=179		Female N=161		Mean Set		Decision
		$\bar{X}$	Sd	$\bar{X}$	Sd	$\bar{X}$	Sd	
1.	Active planning	2.32	1.31	1.13	.50	1.23	.91	LU
2.	Focused problem solving	2.81	1.17	1.38	.92	1.97	1.32	LU
3.	Suppression	2.83	.95	2.88	.95	2.86	.95	HU
4.	Behavioral disengagement	2.63	.99	2.71	.99	2.67	.99	HU
5.	Sleeping	2.21	1.23	1.27	.74	1.74	.99	LU
6.	Denial	2.32	1.31	1.13	.50	1.23	.91	LU
7.	Mental disengagement	2.81	1.17	1.38	.92	1.97	1.32	LU
8.	Substance use	2.83	.95	2.88	.95	2.86	.95	HU
9.	Emotional social support	2.63	.99	2.71	.99	2.67	.99	HU
10.	Engage in social activities like party, visiting a friend	2.21	1.23	1.27	.74	1.74	.99	LU
11.	Venting emotions	2.32	1.31	1.13	.50	1.23	.91	LU
12.	Positive reinterpretation	2.81	1.17	1.38	.92	1.97	1.32	LU
13.	Restraint	2.83	.95	2.88	.95	2.86	.95	HU
14.	Acceptance	2.63	.99	2.71	.99	2.67	.99	HU
15.	Turning to religion	2.21	1.23	1.27	.74	1.74	.99	LU
16.	Humor	2.32	1.31	1.13	.50	1.23	.91	LU
17.	Escape from the problem e.g. attrition	2.81	1.17	1.38	.92	1.97	1.32	LU
18.	Exchange of sex for mark	2.83	.95	2.88	.95	2.86	.95	HU
19.	Giving your lecturer/s money to pass you	2.63	.99	2.71	.99	2.67	.99	HU
20.	Paying your lecturer or another person to write project for you	2.21	1.23	1.27	.74	1.74	.99	LU
	<b>Grand Mean</b>	<b>2.56</b>	<b>1.13</b>	<b>1.87</b>	<b>0.82</b>	<b>2.09</b>	<b>1.03</b>	<b>LU</b>

Source: Survey Data, (2026) \*LU=LOW USAGE, HU=HIGH USAGE

Based on the data presented in Table 2, there are noticeable differences in the prevalent coping strategies among postgraduate students in universities in Bayelsa State based on gender. Male students reported a higher mean usage across most coping strategies compared to their female counterparts. Specifically, males showed relatively higher engagement in strategies such as *focused problem solving* (mean = 2.81), *mental disengagement* (2.81), *venting emotions* (2.32), and *escape from problems* (2.81). These strategies fall under the category of low usage (LU) but show higher mean values among

males, suggesting a greater inclination towards varied coping mechanisms, even if not frequently employed. On the other hand, female students displayed significantly lower mean scores for most coping strategies, with scores such as *active planning* (1.13), *sleeping* (1.27), and *turning to religion* (1.27), indicating a more limited use of both problem-focused and avoidant strategies.

Interestingly, both male and female students showed high usage (HU) of certain maladaptive coping strategies such as *suppression* (mean = 2.86),

*behavioral disengagement* (2.67), *substance use* (2.86), and *restraint* (2.86). These findings imply that while usage levels vary by gender, certain avoidant or passive strategies are commonly used by both groups, potentially indicating a shared experience of stress and limited access to more constructive coping resources. Female students, despite lower overall usage, showed similar patterns in these high-usage categories, especially in behaviors that reflect emotional numbing or withdrawal.

The grand mean score for males (2.56) is notably higher than that of females (1.87), suggesting that male postgraduate students utilize a wider range of coping strategies more frequently than females. However, the general mean usage (2.09) still falls

under the category of *low usage* (LU), indicating that both male and female students are not extensively engaging in effective coping strategies. This highlights a potential gap in coping capacity and the need for targeted interventions that address gender-specific stress responses and promote healthier coping mechanisms among postgraduate students in Bayelsa State universities.

**Hypothesis**

H0<sub>1</sub>: There is no significant difference in the mean ratings on the prevalent coping strategies among postgraduate students in universities in Bayelsa State based on gender.

Table 3: Independent sample t-test analysis on the mean ratings on the prevalent coping strategies among

Gender	N	Mean	SD	Df	T	P	Remark
Male	179	2.56	1.13	338	6.38	.000	Reject H01
Female	161	1.87	.82				

postgraduate students in universities in Bayelsa State based on gender

Source: SPSS OUTPUT (2026)

From Table 3 above, the calculated t-value is 6.38 at 338 degrees of freedom and a 0.05 level of significance. Since the calculated t-value of 6.38 is greater than the critical table value of 1.96, the null hypothesis is rejected. In other words, there is a significant difference between the mean ratings of male and female postgraduate students on the prevalent coping strategies in universities in Bayelsa State. This result implies that gender plays a significant role in how postgraduate students adopt coping strategies in response to academic and psychological stress.

**DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS**

The results from Research Question 1 revealed that male postgraduate students in universities in Bayelsa State exhibited a generally high level of usage of coping strategies for managing academic stress. Respondents indicated that they frequently employed problem-focused approaches such as planning, time management, and seeking practical solutions to academic challenges. The findings suggest that male postgraduate students are more likely to actively engage with stressors in ways that address the source of their stress rather than relying solely on emotional or avoidance strategies. This finding is consistent with earlier studies which reported that male students tend to adopt problem-focused or task-oriented coping strategies that help maintain academic performance and psychological resilience under stressful conditions (6, 8). The moderate standard deviation observed indicates some variability in the extent to which individual male students utilize these strategies, reflecting differences in personal, social, and contextual influences on coping.

The results from Research Question 2 revealed that female postgraduate students in universities in Bayelsa State demonstrated a relatively low level of usage of coping strategies for managing academic stress. Respondents reported less frequent engagement in both problem-focused and emotion-focused strategies, suggesting potential underutilization of mechanisms that could buffer stress. These findings imply that female postgraduate students may encounter additional barriers such as role conflicts, socio-cultural expectations, or limited access to supportive resources that may constrain their coping responses. This outcome aligns with observations that female students in Nigerian universities may experience unique stressors that shape coping patterns differently from their male counterparts (11). The relatively low variability in responses, as indicated by the standard deviation, suggests that most female students consistently reported lower engagement with coping strategies, pointing to a need for targeted institutional support.

The results from Research Question 3 further revealed observable gender-based differences in the prevalent coping strategies adopted by postgraduate students in Bayelsa State. Male postgraduate students reported higher mean scores in coping strategies such as active planning, focused problem solving, mental disengagement, substance use, and venting of emotions compared to female students. This suggests that male students engage more frequently in both adaptive and maladaptive coping mechanisms. In contrast, female students recorded lower mean scores across most coping dimensions, indicating less frequent use of a broad range of strategies.

Hypothesis 1 testing confirmed a statistically significant difference in coping strategies based on

gender. This statistical evidence supports the descriptive findings and affirms that gender significantly influences both the type and extent of coping strategies employed by postgraduate students. The implication is that male and female students may perceive and respond to academic stress differently due to varying psychosocial dynamics and stress appraisal patterns.

These findings are consistent with studies that reported gender-based differences in coping behaviours among Nigerian university students (13, 14). These studies emphasized that males often externalize stress through active engagement or avoidance strategies, whereas females are more inclined toward internal or emotionally expressive coping responses. The observed gender disparity in coping strategies among postgraduate students in Bayelsa State therefore underscores the importance of gender-sensitive interventions. Universities should design tailored mental health services and coping skills workshops that address the distinct needs of male and female postgraduate students in order to enhance academic resilience and overall wellbeing.

#### CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study has concluded that gender differences exist on coping strategies among postgraduate students attending university in Bayelsa State, and male students used all types of coping strategies (problem-focused and avoidant coping) significantly more frequently than females' students did, while females scored significantly lower on all coping strategies (adaptive and maladaptive). All respondents low use of productive coping strategies indicate that most postgraduate students have inadequate coping skills to deal with stress. Based on the conclusions of the study, the following suggestions are offered:

Training should be provided to improve students coping skills: Suggestions offered based on these conclusions are as follows:

1. conduct gender-sensitive counselling and academic support programmes would assist improve postgraduate students' coping skills.
2. There should be workshops on how to properly implement adaptive coping strategies (targeted at female students in particular).
3. The institution should create structures that would help students have access to psychological resources and peer support groups.

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