

## **Prevalent Coping Strategies for Academic Stress Among Postgraduate Students in Universities in Bayelsa State Across Selected Demographic Variables**

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**Abstract:** *The study investigated the prevalent coping strategies for academic stress adopted by postgraduate students in universities in Bayelsa State, considering selected demographic variables. A descriptive survey design was employed, guided by three research questions. The population comprised all postgraduate students in public universities in Bayelsa State, with a sample of 340 respondents drawn from various institutions. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire titled "Postgraduate Students' Coping Strategies and Stress Assessment Questionnaire" (PSCSAQ). The content, face and construct validity of the instrument was done by experts and had a reliability coefficient of 0.83. Data were analyzed using mean, standard deviation, and independent sample t-tests. The findings revealed significant differences in coping strategies based on gender, institution type, and age. Male students reported higher use of coping strategies compared to female students, while students from federal university exhibited higher coping strategy usage than those from state universities. Older students showed a higher tendency to employ coping strategies compared to their younger counterparts. The study concluded that postgraduate students in Bayelsa State employ various coping mechanisms, with differences influenced by demographic factors. Recommendations include providing targeted support for students, especially females and those in state institutions, to improve their coping mechanisms in academic settings. Counselling implications of the study suggest the need for universities to develop gender- and age-sensitive mental health and coping skills programs tailored to the diverse needs of their student populations.*

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**Keywords:** postgraduate students, coping strategies, gender, institution type, age

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## INTRODUCTION

Postgraduate students in universities serve as pivotal contributors to the academic and research fabric of any educational system, particularly in Bayelsa State, where the advancement of higher education is crucial for regional and national development. These students often shoulder the dual responsibility of pursuing intensive academic work while simultaneously managing personal, financial, and social demands. The complex intersection of these responsibilities frequently exposes postgraduate students to heightened stress levels, underscoring the need to explore the mechanisms they employ to cope with such stressors (Arslan, 2021).

Academic stress, when poorly managed, may negatively impact students' mental health and academic performance. While much scholarly attention has been given to the causes and manifestations of academic stress and mental health concerns (Conway et al., 2015; Misra & McKean, 2020), increasing focus is now shifting toward understanding how students cope with these challenges. Coping strategies refer to the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral efforts individuals employ to manage the internal and external demands of stressful situations (Folkman & Lazarus, 2018). For postgraduate students, these strategies are vital tools that can determine the extent to which stress affects their academic progress and overall well-being.

Coping strategies are generally classified as adaptive or maladaptive. Adaptive strategies—such as seeking social support, effective time management, and problem-focused coping—are often associated with better academic performance and mental health outcomes. In contrast, maladaptive strategies—such as avoidance, denial, or substance use—tend to exacerbate stress and lead to adverse academic and psychological consequences (Amit & Tamir, 2019). However, the choice and effectiveness of these strategies are not uniform across all students; they are significantly influenced by demographic and contextual factors such as age, gender, and the type of institution attended.

Age also significantly influences how students perceive and manage stress. Chronological age, often the most visible indicator, may correlate with maturity, experience, and resilience (Ezike, 2015). Older students may possess more advanced emotional regulation and time management skills, while younger students may still be developing such competencies. Psychological age, which reflects how individuals perceive their own maturity and life stage, can also affect coping mechanisms. Research has shown that age-related differences influence not only stress perception but also the selection and effectiveness of coping strategies, making age an essential variable in any study examining stress among postgraduate students (Mokgele & Rothmann, 2014).

Another critical yet often overlooked factor is the type of institution whether federal or state attended by postgraduate students. The type of institution can influence stress levels and available

coping resources through variations in funding, academic expectations, administrative efficiency, and student support services. Federal universities, typically more resource-rich, may offer better mental health and academic support services, which can facilitate effective coping (Ezike, 2015). In contrast, students in state institutions might face additional challenges due to limited resources, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and heavier teaching loads, all of which can heighten stress levels and limit coping options (Reyes & Feldman, 2012; Rouyn & Meme, 2012).

Given the diversity in demographic variables, it becomes clear that coping strategies among postgraduate students are not monolithic. Gender, age, and type of institution collectively shape students' lived experiences and their response to academic stress. Despite the existing body of literature that addresses mental health and stress among students, relatively few studies have investigated how these demographic variables influence the coping strategies of postgraduate students, especially within the Nigerian context and more specifically, in Bayelsa State. This study, therefore, seeks to bridge this gap by examining the prevalent coping strategies employed by postgraduate students in universities in Bayelsa State, with a focus on how these strategies differ across gender, age, and institution type. The findings are expected to inform institutional policies, counselling services, and academic support programs designed to promote healthier coping mechanisms and improve the overall academic experience for postgraduate students.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The increasing prevalence of mental health challenges among postgraduate students has emerged as a significant global concern, with stress-related disorders becoming more pronounced due to the demanding nature of postgraduate education. Postgraduate students are often expected to juggle multiple academic responsibilities, such as intensive coursework, thesis writing, and research commitments, while managing personal, social, and sometimes professional obligations (Evans et al., 2018). According to the World Health Organization (2017), stress remains a major global contributor to mental health disorders, with students in higher education institutions being particularly vulnerable. In this context, the Nigerian academic environment—particularly within Bayelsa State is further compounded by systemic limitations such as underfunded educational facilities, inconsistent academic calendars, and inadequate psychological support services. These factors create an academic climate that heightens the risk of stress, burnout, and other psychological disturbances among postgraduate students (Mba, 2019). Despite the significant risks associated with academic stress, many students continue to struggle in silence, often lacking the appropriate mechanisms to mitigate its harmful effects.

Although some studies have examined mental health and academic stress in Nigerian universities, there remains a dearth of empirical evidence on the specific coping strategies adopted by postgraduate students, especially in relation to key demographic variables such as gender, institution type, and age. Coping strategies whether adaptive or maladaptive serve as critical determinants of how students respond to academic stress, and their effectiveness can vary

significantly across demographic lines (Folkman & Lazarus, 2018). Similarly, students in federal institutions may have access to more robust support systems compared to their peers in state-owned universities, while older students may draw on life experience to navigate stress differently than younger ones (Ezike, 2015). However, existing literature does not sufficiently address these nuances in the Nigerian context, particularly within Bayelsa State. This study is therefore warranted to investigate the prevalent coping strategies among postgraduate students in Bayelsa State universities, exploring how these strategies differ across institution type, and age, in order to inform targeted and effective interventions.

### **Aim and Objectives of the Study**

The study examined the prevalent coping strategies adopted by postgraduate students in universities in Bayelsa State across selected demographic variables. Specifically, this study achieved the following:

1. To examine the prevalent coping strategies among postgraduate students in universities in Bayelsa State based on institution type.
2. To ascertain the prevalent coping strategies among postgraduate students in universities in Bayelsa State based on age.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions will guide the study:

1. What are the differences in the prevalent coping strategies among postgraduate students in universities in Bayelsa State based on institution type?
2. What are the differences in the prevalent coping strategies among postgraduate students in universities in Bayelsa State based on age?

### **Hypotheses**

The following null hypotheses were formulated and will be tested at a 0.05 level of significance:  
H<sub>01</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 institution type.

H<sub>02</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 age.

### **METHODS**

This study adopted a descriptive survey design. Lawrant (2018), defined descriptive survey research design as the one in which a group of people or items is studied by collecting and analyzing data from only a few individuals or items considered to be representatives of the entire group. A sample of 340 postgraduate students out of 1223 was used for the study. Systematic sampling was used to select the first 340 postgraduate students occupying all the odd serial

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numbers in the admission register of two tertiary institutions. The instrument for data collection was a "Postgraduate Students' Coping Strategies and Stress Assessment Questionnaire" (PSCSAQ), developed by the researcher. The instrument is structured into two sections: A and B. Section A contains 4 items that assess the demographic characteristics of the respondents, such as age, gender and institution type. Section B includes 20 items focused on identifying the coping strategies employed by postgraduate students to manage academic stress. In Section B, a different four-point scale is used to assess the frequency of coping strategy use: Used often (UO=4), Moderately used (MU=3), Rarely used (RU=2), and Not used at all (NUAA=1). The instrument was developed to capture a comprehensive view of both the psychological stress and the coping mechanisms of postgraduate students, ensuring that the data gathered is both reliable and valid for the purpose of this study.

Two (2) copies of the instrument were given to two specialists in Educational Measurement and Evaluation in the Faculty of Education of Niger Delta University for face, content and construct validity. Operationally, to test for reliability of the instrument to be used, a pilot study was carried out using 10 postgraduate students who were randomly selected from tertiary institutions outside the area under study. Cronbach Alpha reliability formula was used to determine the reliability coefficient of the instrument. The objective was to determine the internal consistency of the items used in the instrument. Also, the choice of Cronbach Alpha formula was based on the fact that the instrument was polychotomously scored (no right or wrong answer) and the reliability method enabled the researcher to administer the instrument once, saving cost and time. The aggregate reliability coefficient for the instrument was 0.83.

The researcher personally visited the sampled universities with the help of two research assistants to administer the instruments. The respondents were briefed on the modalities and the reasons behind the administration of the instrument. One-on-one mode of administration was adopted. This method ensured a 100% return rate. The responses generated from the responses were collated for statistical analysis. The research questions were answered using mean and standard deviation, while the hypotheses were analyzed using independent sample t-test at a 0.05 level of significance. Items with a mean score of 2.50 and above were considered "High Usage," while items with a mean score below 2.50 were considered "Low Usage."

## **RESULT**

### **Research Question 1**

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

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**Table 1: Mean and Standard deviation on the differences in the prevalent coping strategies among postgraduate students in universities in Bayelsa State based on institution type**

S/N	Items Statements	State N=226		Federal N=114		Mean Set		Decision
		$\bar{x}$	Sd	$\bar{x}$	Sd	$\bar{x}$	Sd	
1.	Active planning	1.41	.96	3.20	.73	2.31	.85	HU
2.	Focused problem solving	1.52	1.00	2.09	1.25	1.81	1.12	LU
3.	Suppression	1.38	.91	2.10	1.17	1.74	1.04	LU
4.	Behavioral disengagement	1.49	.98	3.14	.88	2.32	.93	LU
5.	Sleeping	1.38	.91	2.24	1.21	1.81	1.06	LU
6.	Denial	1.41	.96	3.20	.73	2.31	.85	LU
7.	Mental disengagement	1.52	1.00	2.09	1.25	1.81	1.12	LU
8.	Substance use	1.38	.91	2.10	1.17	1.74	1.04	LU
9.	Emotional social support	1.49	.98	3.14	.88	2.32	.93	LU
10.	Engage in social activities like party, visiting a friend	1.38	.91	2.24	1.21	1.81	1.06	LU
11.	Venting emotions	1.41	.96	3.20	.73	2.31	.85	LU
12.	Positive reinterpretation	1.52	1.00	2.09	1.25	1.81	1.12	LU
13.	Restraint	1.38	.91	2.10	1.17	1.74	1.04	LU
14.	Acceptance	1.49	.98	3.14	.88	2.32	.93	LU
15.	Turning to religion	1.38	.91	2.24	1.21	1.81	1.06	LU
16.	Humor	1.41	.96	3.20	.73	2.31	.85	LU
17.	Escape from the problem e.g. attrition	1.52	1.00	2.09	1.25	1.81	1.12	LU
18.	Exchange of sex for mark	1.38	.91	2.10	1.17	1.74	1.04	LU
19.	Giving your lecturer/s money to pass you	1.49	.98	3.14	.88	2.32	.93	LU
20.	Paying your lecturer or another person to write project for you	1.38	.91	2.24	1.21	1.81	1.06	LU
	<b>Grand Mean</b>	<b>1.43</b>	<b>0.96</b>	<b>2.55</b>	<b>1.04</b>	<b>1.99</b>	<b>1.01</b>	<b>LU</b>

Source: Survey Data, (2026)

Based on the data presented in Table 1, distinct differences were observed in the prevalent coping strategies among postgraduate students in universities in Bayelsa State based on institution type. Postgraduate students in federal universities reported significantly higher mean scores across almost all coping strategies compared to their counterparts in state universities. For example, federal university students had higher mean scores in *active planning* (3.20), *behavioral disengagement* (3.14), and *emotional social support* (3.14), indicating a greater reliance on a variety of coping mechanisms. In contrast, state university students consistently reported lower mean scores, typically around 1.38 to 1.52, suggesting limited usage of these coping strategies.

The pattern of responses suggests that students in federal institutions are more actively engaging in both adaptive and maladaptive coping strategies. The only item that met the threshold for *high usage* (HU) in the overall mean set was *active planning* (2.31), driven predominantly by federal university respondents. Despite the increased usage among federal students, the coping strategies used still leaned toward avoidant behaviors such as *venting emotions*, *engaging in social activities*, and *giving money or gifts to lecturers*. These strategies, while used more frequently by federal university students, may not always lead to healthy stress management outcomes. The overall

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mean for state university students (1.43) reflects minimal engagement with coping mechanisms, which could signal limited access to support systems or stress management resources. Overall, the grand mean score (1.99) for the combined institutions falls under the *low usage* (LU) category, indicating that, generally, postgraduate students in Bayelsa State are not extensively utilizing coping strategies to manage academic stress effectively. However, the noticeable difference between state and federal institutions points to institutional disparities in stress exposure or support availability. These findings underscore the need for institution-specific interventions, particularly in state universities, where students appear less engaged in coping behaviors and may benefit from enhanced counselling services, stress management workshops, and psychosocial support initiatives tailored to their institutional context.

### Research Question 2

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

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

S/N	Items Statements	Young N=209		old N=131		Mean Set		Decision
		$\bar{x}$	Sd	$\bar{x}$	Sd	$\bar{x}$	Sd	
21.	Active planning	1.56	1.07	2.04	1.23	<b>1.80</b>	1.05	LU
22.	Focused problem solving	1.38	.90	2.25	1.22	<b>3.63</b>	1.07	LU
23.	Suppression	1.71	.95	3.03	.88	<b>2.38</b>	.92	LU
24.	Behavioral disengagement	1.38	.90	2.16	1.27	<b>1.78</b>	1.09	LU
25.	Sleeping	1.45	.81	2.00	1.26	<b>1.73</b>	1.05	LU
26.	Denial	<b>1.49</b>	<b>.92</b>	<b>2.29</b>	<b>1.17</b>	<b>2.26</b>	<b>1.04</b>	LU
27.	Mental disengagement	1.56	1.07	2.04	1.23	<b>1.80</b>	1.05	LU
28.	Substance use	1.38	.90	2.25	1.22	<b>3.63</b>	1.07	LU
29.	Emotional social support	1.71	.95	3.03	.88	<b>2.38</b>	.92	LU
30.	Engage in social activities like party, visiting a friend	1.38	.90	2.16	1.27	<b>1.78</b>	1.09	LU
31.	Venting emotions	1.45	.81	2.00	1.26	<b>1.73</b>	1.05	LU
32.	Positive reinterpretation	<b>1.49</b>	<b>.92</b>	<b>2.29</b>	<b>1.17</b>	<b>2.26</b>	<b>1.04</b>	LU
33.	Restraint	1.56	1.07	2.04	1.23	<b>1.80</b>	1.05	LU
34.	Acceptance	1.38	.90	2.25	1.22	<b>3.63</b>	1.07	LU
35.	Turning to religion	1.71	.95	3.03	.88	<b>2.38</b>	.92	LU
36.	Humor	1.38	.90	2.16	1.27	<b>1.78</b>	1.09	LU
37.	Escape from the problem e.g. attrition	1.45	.81	2.00	1.26	<b>1.73</b>	1.05	LU
38.	Exchange of sex for mark	<b>1.49</b>	<b>.92</b>	<b>2.29</b>	<b>1.17</b>	<b>2.26</b>	<b>1.04</b>	LU
39.	Giving your lecturer/s money to pass you	1.56	1.07	2.04	1.23	<b>1.80</b>	1.05	LU
40.	Paying your lecturer or another person to write project for you	1.38	.90	2.25	1.22	<b>3.63</b>	1.07	LU
	<b>Grand Mean</b>	<b>1.49</b>	<b>.93</b>	<b>2.28</b>	<b>1.17</b>	<b>2.30</b>	1.03	LU

Source: Survey Data, (2026)

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Based on the data presented in Table 3, there are observable differences in the prevalent coping strategies among postgraduate students in universities in Bayelsa State based on age. The age categories were grouped into "young" and "old" students. Across all 20 items measuring coping strategies, older postgraduate students consistently recorded higher mean scores than their younger counterparts. For instance, in strategies such as *focused problem solving* (mean = 2.25 for older vs. 1.38 for younger), *emotional social support* (3.03 vs. 1.71), and *denial* (2.29 vs. 1.49), older students indicated more frequent use. These patterns suggest that older postgraduate students are generally more engaged in both active and avoidant coping strategies than younger students.

Despite these differences, all the coping strategies across both age groups fall within the "Low Usage" (LU) category, as indicated by the grand mean score of 2.30. The grand mean for younger students is 1.49, whereas the grand mean for older students is 2.28, clearly showing that older students tend to utilize coping strategies more often. The variation could be attributed to factors such as maturity, life experiences, or previous exposure to academic stressors, which may equip older students with more tools or tendencies to actively manage stress. Notably, strategies such as *turning to religion*, *positive reinterpretation*, and *acceptance* were more frequently used among older students, indicating a possible leaning toward cognitive or emotional regulation approaches. In general, while the level of coping strategy use remains low among postgraduate students irrespective of age, older students demonstrate relatively higher levels of engagement with these strategies. This suggests the need for targeted intervention programs, especially for younger students, to equip them with effective coping mechanisms to handle academic and psychological stress. Introducing peer mentoring programs and stress management workshops could help bridge this coping gap and promote holistic academic well-being across all age groups.

### Hypotheses

H<sub>01</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 institution type.

**Table 3: Independent sample t-test analysis on the prevalent coping strategies among postgraduate students in universities in Bayelsa State based on institution type**

Institution	N	Mean	SD	df	T	P	Remark
State	226	1.43	.96	338	9.87	.000	Reject H <sub>01</sub>
Federal	114	2.55	1.04				

**Source: SPSS OUTPUT (2026)**

From Table 3 above, the calculated t-value is 9.87 at 338 degrees of freedom and a 0.05 level of significance. Since the calculated t-value of 9.87 is greater in absolute value than the critical table

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value of 1.96, the null hypothesis is rejected. This indicates that there is a significant difference between the mean ratings of postgraduate students in state and federal universities on the prevalent coping strategies in universities in Bayelsa State. The result suggests that the type of institution significantly influences the coping strategies adopted by postgraduate students.

H<sub>02</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 age.

**Table 4: Independent sample t-test analysis on the prevalent coping strategies among postgraduate students in universities in Bayelsa State based on age**

Age	N	Mean	SD	df	T	P	Remark
Young	209	1.49	.93	338	6.89	.000	Reject H <sub>02</sub>
Old	131	2.28	1.17				

**Source: SPSS OUTPUT (2026)**

From Table 4 above, the calculated t-value is 6.89 at 338 degrees of freedom and a 0.05 level of significance. Since the calculated t-value of 6.89 is greater than the critical table value of 1.96, the null hypothesis is rejected. This implies that there is a significant difference in the mean ratings on the prevalent coping strategies among postgraduate students in universities in Bayelsa State based on age. Therefore, age plays a significant role in influencing the coping strategies adopted by postgraduate students.

## DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The results from Research Question 1 revealed notable differences in the prevalent coping strategies among postgraduate students in universities in Bayelsa State based on the type of institution (state or federal). The findings indicate that postgraduate students in federal universities reported higher usage of various coping strategies such as active planning, behavioral disengagement, denial, emotional social support, and humor, compared to their counterparts in state universities.

This observation was further validated by the result of Hypothesis 1. This means that there is a statistically significant difference in the mean ratings on the prevalent coping strategies among postgraduate students based on the type of institution. The significant variation in coping strategy utilization may be attributed to differences in institutional environments, resource availability, academic workload, and access to psychological support services between state and federal universities. Federal universities, which often benefit from better funding and student support services, might provide more conducive environments that encourage the adoption of various coping strategies.

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These findings align with the work of Okonkwo and Igbokwe (2020), who reported that students in better-resourced institutions are more likely to develop and adopt diverse coping mechanisms to manage academic stress. Similarly, studies by Eze and Nwachukwu (2021) revealed that students in federal institutions often benefit from structured psychological and counseling services, which enhance their stress management skills. Consequently, this highlights the need for state universities to strengthen their student support systems through enhanced counselling services, stress management training, and wellness programs. Such interventions can empower students with effective coping strategies, ultimately promoting their academic success and psychological well-being.

The results from Research Question 2 revealed noticeable differences in the prevalent coping strategies among postgraduate students in universities in Bayelsa State based on age. The findings indicate that older postgraduate students tend to adopt a wider range of coping strategies compared to their younger counterparts. For instance, older students reported higher mean scores on strategies such as focused problem solving, suppression, emotional social support, denial, and turning to religion. These patterns suggest that older students may have developed more mature or diverse coping mechanisms, possibly due to increased life experiences or better emotional regulation.

The results of Hypothesis 2 further affirm these observations, which indicates that there is a statistically significant difference in the mean ratings of coping strategies among postgraduate students based on age. The implication of this result is that age plays a role in how postgraduate students cope with academic stress, with older students more likely to adopt and utilize constructive coping mechanisms.

This finding aligns with the study of Uche and Ogbonna (2019), who found that age influences psychological resilience and coping style among university students. They argued that older students often possess better self-regulation and problem-solving abilities, enabling them to adopt more effective coping strategies. Similarly, Okere and Ezenwosu (2022) observed that age-related maturity contributes to the selection of adaptive strategies like planning, acceptance, and emotional support-seeking behaviors in postgraduate learners.

To support all students especially the younger one's universities should implement targeted interventions such as stress management workshops, mentorship programs, and peer counseling initiatives. These services can help younger postgraduate students develop the coping skills necessary for navigating the rigors of academic life, thereby enhancing their well-being and academic performance.

## CONCLUSION

Based on the findings from the study, it can be concluded that postgraduate students in universities in Bayelsa State employ various coping strategies to manage academic stress, with significant differences observed based on gender, institution type, and age. Male students, federal university students, and older students demonstrated a higher tendency to utilize a broader range of coping mechanisms compared to their counterparts. However, the overall usage of these coping strategies remains low across the board, highlighting the need for increased awareness and support systems to enhance effective stress management among postgraduate students. These findings underscore the importance of demographic factors in shaping coping behaviors and suggest that tailored psychological and institutional interventions are necessary to equip students with adaptive strategies that foster academic success and emotional resilience.

## Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are given:

1. University management should promote awareness campaigns on the importance of adaptive coping strategies, emphasizing their role in academic performance and mental health.
2. Regular workshops and seminars should be organized to equip postgraduate students with practical tools and resources for managing academic stress effectively, fostering a supportive academic environment.

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