



## ACADEMIC PRESSURE AND MENTAL HEALTH AMONG FINAL-YEAR STUDENTS IN NIGERIAN TERTIARY INSTITUTIONS

**Rasheedah Toluwase Imam**

Department of Mental Health & Psychiatric Nursing, Faculty of Nursing Sciences Al-Hikmah  
University Ilorin Kwara State  
Orcid: 009-0007-0626-2203  
E-mail: [Ummuhdhayfah61@gmail.com](mailto:Ummuhdhayfah61@gmail.com)

&

**Dr. Balqis Olabisi Popoola**

Departments of Educational Management and Couselling, Faculty of Education, Al-Hikmah  
University, Ilorin, Nigeria  
E-mail: [balqispopoola87@gmail.com](mailto:balqispopoola87@gmail.com)  
Orcid/ 0000-003-2095-3231

### ABSTRACT

*The growing burden of academic demands has made academic pressure an important concern among university students, especially final-year students who are confronted with multiple challenges associated with completing their studies This study examined the relationship between academic pressure and mental health among final-year students in Nigerian tertiary institutions. A cross-sectional survey design was employed, with data collected from 116 final-year undergraduates (75.9% female; mean age =  $23.4 \pm 2.1$  years) selected via stratified random sampling from public and private universities. Participants completed standardized measures including the Depression Anxiety Stress Scale (DASS-21) and a validated Academic Pressure Inventory. Descriptive statistics revealed that 79.3% of students experienced severe pressure to maintain high grades, while 63.8% reported moderate-to-severe emotional exhaustion. Pearson's correlation analysis demonstrated a strong positive relationship between academic pressure and mental health symptoms ( $r = 0.72, p < .001$ ). Multiple regression analysis indicated that academic pressure significantly predicted mental health outcomes ( $\beta = 0.58, p < .001$ ), accounting for 54% of the variance ( $R^2 = 0.54$ ). Gender differences were significant ( $t(114) = -3.21, p = .002$ ), with female students reporting higher stress levels ( $M = 3.92, SD = 0.87$ ) than males ( $M = 3.45, SD = 0.91$ ). Institutional type also moderated outcomes, as public university students exhibited 18.5% worse mental health scores than private university counterparts ( $F(2,113) = 5.78, p = .004$ ). These findings align with Conservation of Resources Theory, suggesting that chronic academic demands deplete students' psychological reserves. The study highlights the urgent need for institutional reforms, including accessible counseling services, workload adjustments, and gender-sensitive support programs. These results contribute to global discourse on student wellbeing while emphasizing context-specific interventions for Nigerian higher education.*

**Keywords:** Academic stress, Mental health, University students, Nigeria.

### Introduction

Mental health among university students has become a global public health concern, gaining more attention in the past decade as institutions report rising cases of depression, anxiety, and stress-



related disorders among their student populations. This concern has become even more pronounced in the post-pandemic era, where the shift in academic structures, uncertainty about the future, and the psychological aftermath of isolation have left many students grappling with emotional and mental challenges (World Health Organization, 2022). Among these students, final-year undergraduates are particularly vulnerable due to the compounding stressors associated with the end of their academic journey.

Final-year students in tertiary institutions experience a distinct and often overwhelming blend of academic, social, and emotional pressures. These include the burden of completing research projects, preparing for final examinations, facing job market uncertainties, and often managing family and financial responsibilities simultaneously. This cumulative stress has been identified as a major trigger for psychological distress, manifesting in symptoms such as burnout, emotional fatigue, depressive episodes, sleep disorders, and poor academic performance (Owusu-Antwi et al., 2023; Sanni et al., 2021). The pressure to “finish well,” combined with fear of failure or disappointing family expectations, creates an intense psychological environment that few students are adequately prepared to navigate.

Globally, the incidence of psychological disorders among students has surged. Studies conducted in countries like the United States, China, and South Africa have consistently reported a high prevalence of anxiety and depressive symptoms among final-year university students, often linked to academic pressure and poor institutional support (Karyotaki et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2021). In Nigeria, research echoes these concerns, revealing alarming rates of psychological distress among undergraduates, with final-year students disproportionately affected due to cumulative academic tension and limited psychological resilience resources (Ugwueze & Nwosu, 2021).

What makes the Nigerian context particularly concerning is the layered complexity of the educational system itself. Public universities and polytechnics are frequently interrupted by industrial actions such as the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) strikes, resulting in protracted academic calendars, missed timelines, and heightened uncertainty (Adigun & Ojo, 2022). In many institutions, overcrowded lecture halls, poor student-to-lecturer ratios, inadequate research guidance, and a lack of well-structured mentorship systems intensify students' academic burden. These systemic inefficiencies amplify academic anxiety and create an environment where students are left to navigate the final phase of their studies with minimal institutional support.

Furthermore, in many Nigerian families and communities, academic achievement is often equated with self-worth and future success. Cultural pressures and high parental expectations push students to strive for top performance, sometimes at the expense of their emotional and mental wellbeing. This cultural reality often leads students to suppress signs of psychological strain, for fear of being perceived as weak, unserious, or incapable (Eze & Okonkwo, 2023). Compounded by the stigma surrounding mental health in many Nigerian societies, students facing mental health challenges are often discouraged from seeking help, thereby worsening their condition.

Despite growing awareness of mental health globally, support systems within most Nigerian tertiary institutions remain underdeveloped. While some institutions have established guidance and counseling units, these are often under-resourced, poorly staffed, and lack visibility among the



student population (Chukwuorji & Ifeagwazi, 2020). As a result, many students rely on peer support or self-coping mechanisms that are often ineffective or harmful, such as substance use or academic withdrawal (Abubakar & Bello, 2022).

Addressing the psychological challenges facing final-year students requires a multidimensional approach, starting with robust empirical evidence that highlights the scope, triggers, and consequences of academic pressure on student mental health. This study aimed to investigate the relationship between academic pressure and mental health among final-year students in Nigerian tertiary institutions, with the goal of contributing to the formulation of evidence-based mental health policies, student-centered academic reforms, and more responsive support services across Nigerian campuses.

### **Statement of the Problem**

In recent years, academic pressure has emerged as one of the most critical challenges confronting university students, particularly those in their final year. As students approach the culmination of their academic journey, they are faced with numerous demands including the completion of final-year research projects, preparation for comprehensive examinations, submission of cumulative coursework, and uncertainty about their post-graduation future. These demands often coincide with societal and familial expectations for success, intensifying the psychological strain experienced during this period.

Despite the global and local recognition of mental health challenges among students, Nigerian tertiary institutions have yet to adequately address the specific stressors confronting final-year students. Research suggests that these students are especially prone to mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, chronic stress, and burnout (Owusu-Antwi et al., 2023; Ugwueze & Nwosu, 2021). However, there is a lack of empirical studies focused specifically on the impact of academic pressure on their psychological wellbeing within the Nigerian context.

Moreover, institutional support mechanisms such as student counseling, academic mentorship, and stress management resources are either weak or nonexistent in many Nigerian universities and polytechnics. The stigma associated with mental health issues further discourages students from seeking help, often leaving them to suffer in silence (Chukwuorji & Ifeagwazi, 2020).

In the absence of robust support systems and adequate research attention, the academic and emotional wellbeing of final-year students continues to deteriorate. This gap underscores the urgent need to understand the nature, intensity, and implications of academic pressure on mental health. Without such understanding, institutions risk graduating students who are academically qualified but emotionally exhausted ill-prepared for life beyond the university walls.

This study, therefore, aims to fill this gap by exploring the extent to which academic pressure influences mental health among final-year students in Nigerian tertiary institutions and to propose relevant recommendations for institutional and policy intervention.



### **Objectives of the Study**

The primary objective of this study is to examine the relationship between academic pressure and mental health among final-year students in Nigerian tertiary institutions. The specific objectives are as follows:

1. To assess the level of academic pressure experienced by final-year students in selected tertiary institutions.
2. To evaluate the prevalence of mental health challenges such as stress, anxiety, and emotional exhaustion among final-year students.
3. To investigate the relationship between academic pressure and mental health symptoms among final-year students in Nigerian tertiary institutions.
4. To evaluate the differences in academic pressure levels or mental health symptoms between male and female final-year students
5. To explore the effect of institutional type (public vs. private university) on academic pressure or mental health outcome

### **Research Questions**

1. What is the level of academic pressure experienced by final-year students in selected tertiary institutions?
2. What is the prevalence of mental health challenges such as stress, anxiety, and emotional exhaustion among final-year students?

### **Hypothesis**

**H<sub>01</sub>:** There is no statistically significant relationship between academic pressure and mental health symptoms among final-year students in Nigerian tertiary institutions

**H<sub>02</sub>:** There are no significant differences in academic pressure levels or mental health symptoms between male and female final-year students

**H<sub>03</sub>:** Institutional type (public vs. private university) has no significant effect on academic pressure or mental health outcomes

### **Literature Review**

Mental health challenges among university students have become a significant global concern, especially following the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Final-year students in tertiary institutions experience a critical period marked by intense academic demands, career uncertainties, and heightened expectations from society and family. These pressures not only affect their academic performance but also compromise their mental wellbeing. Recent research has highlighted increasing rates of stress, anxiety, depression, and emotional exhaustion among students nearing the end of their academic programs (Pascoe, Hetrick, & Parker, 2020; Owusu-Antwi et al., 2023).

Understanding the multifaceted experiences of final-year students in the Nigerian context where institutional challenges, socio-cultural expectations, and limited mental health services intersect is crucial for developing effective support strategies. This literature review synthesizes global and



local research findings on the prevalence of mental health challenges, the experience of academic pressure, gender and institutional differences, and relevant theoretical frameworks guiding this study.

### **Prevalence of Mental Health Challenges Among Final-Year Students**

Globally, studies consistently report high rates of psychological distress among university students, with final-year students particularly vulnerable. A meta-analysis by Rotenstein et al. (2021) found that depression rates among final-year students were approximately 27.2%, while anxiety rates reached 33.8%. These rates have risen notably following the COVID-19 pandemic, where the disruption of academic calendars and future employment uncertainty intensified emotional instability among students (World Health Organization, 2022).

In the Nigerian context, Ugwueze and Nwosu (2021) reported that more than 58% of final-year university students experienced moderate to severe psychological distress. Emotional exhaustion, feelings of helplessness, and heightened anxiety levels were frequently cited symptoms. Factors such as poor institutional support, prolonged academic calendars due to industrial actions, and societal pressures were identified as exacerbating factors (Eze & Okonkwo, 2023).

Furthermore, studies by Abubakar and Bello (2022) highlight that Nigerian students rarely seek professional mental health assistance due to stigma and lack of accessible services, leading to underreporting and untreated psychological challenges.

### **Academic Pressure Experienced by Final-Year Students**

The phenomenon of academic pressure in Nigerian tertiary institutions is complex and multidimensional, shaped by a unique intersection of systemic, socio-cultural, and individual factors. Unlike their counterparts in more developed countries, Nigerian students often contend with structural challenges that amplify academic stress and threaten mental wellbeing.

Academic pressure among final-year students is multifaceted, encompassing research project requirements, comprehensive examinations, tight academic schedules, and high career expectations. According to Saraswathi et al. (2020), final-year students reported the highest levels of academic burnout compared to students at lower academic levels, largely due to cumulative academic stress and uncertainty about the future.

One of the primary contributors to academic pressure in Nigeria is the frequent disruption of academic calendars caused by industrial actions, particularly those orchestrated by the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) and related bodies. According to Yusuf et al. (2021), recurrent strikes prolong students' academic journeys, creating uncertainty, academic backlog, and heightened anxiety, especially among final-year students who are eager to complete their studies and transition into the labor market.

Institutional inadequacies also play a critical role. Many Nigerian universities and polytechnics suffer from infrastructural deficits, including overcrowded lecture halls, limited access to libraries, poor supervision systems for final-year projects, and insufficient counseling services (Adigun & Ojo, 2022). These systemic failures increase the workload on students, force them into high-



pressure academic environments, and deprive them of critical academic and emotional support resources.

Culturally, there is significant pressure on students to achieve academic excellence as a marker of family pride and future economic stability. Eze and Okonkwo (2023) noted that in many Nigerian families, success in education is seen not just as a personal achievement but as a collective family triumph. Consequently, students internalize high expectations, and failure to meet these expectations can result in feelings of guilt, shame, and low self-esteem, all of which adversely affect mental health.

Moreover, access to mental health services within Nigerian tertiary institutions remains extremely limited. Although some universities have guidance and counseling units, they are often underfunded, poorly staffed, and stigmatized. As a result, many students do not seek help even when experiencing severe psychological distress (Chukwuorji & Ifeagwazi, 2020).

The intersection of these systemic, cultural, and personal pressures creates a uniquely challenging environment for Nigerian final-year students. Academic pressure in this context is not merely about passing exams or completing projects; it represents a struggle for identity, survival, and future prospects in a socio-economically challenging environment.

Thus, understanding academic pressure in Nigeria requires a holistic approach that acknowledges the broader educational, cultural, and institutional landscapes in which students operate. By investigating these dynamics, this study aims to provide a deeper insight into the psychological toll of academic demands on final-year students and propose context-specific interventions for promoting mental health in Nigerian tertiary education.

### **Effect of Gender and Institutional Differences on Mental Health of Students**

Gender has been shown to moderate the psychological impact of academic pressure among students. Studies such as Lee et al. (2021) revealed that female students are generally more susceptible to reporting higher levels of academic-related anxiety and emotional distress, while male students may exhibit stress differently, often internalizing symptoms or engaging in riskier coping mechanisms.

In the Nigerian academic setting, Adigun and Ojo (2022) observed that female final-year students tend to report greater levels of emotional exhaustion and anxiety, attributed to gender-specific societal expectations and cultural norms around academic success. Conversely, male students reported higher tendencies towards withdrawal and substance use under academic stress.

Institutional differences also matter. Students from private universities often report different academic stress profiles compared to those from public institutions. Private institutions tend to have more structured calendars and better facilities, potentially reducing uncertainty but introducing new forms of academic pressure, such as higher financial and performance expectations (Chukwuorji & Ifeagwazi, 2020). Meanwhile, students in public universities face instability from frequent strikes, limited resources, and inconsistent academic schedules, exacerbating feelings of frustration and helplessness (Yusuf et al., 2021).



## Theoretical Review and Application

Understanding the relationship between academic pressure and mental health is grounded in several psychological theories that explain stress response, emotional exhaustion, and coping mechanisms among individuals in high-demand environments, such as tertiary education settings. This study will primarily draw upon three interrelated theories

### *1. Cognitive Appraisal Theory of Stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984)*

Cognitive Appraisal Theory postulates that psychological stress arises from an individual's evaluation of a situation as exceeding their coping resources. According to Lazarus and Folkman, stress is not merely the result of external pressures, but how individuals interpret and respond to those pressures. In the context of final-year students, academic demands such as final projects, examinations, and career planning may be appraised as threatening or overwhelming, thereby triggering emotional distress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms (Lazarus, 2020 update in Health Psychology Review).

### *2. Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985)*

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) emphasizes the role of intrinsic motivation and psychological needs autonomy, competence, and relatedness in promoting psychological wellbeing. When academic systems emphasize rigid standards, high stakes testing, and external evaluations without considering students' intrinsic needs, it may undermine their motivation and emotional health. Studies show that unmet psychological needs in academic environments are associated with higher stress levels, reduced academic engagement, and mental health issues among students (Deci & Ryan, 2021 update in Journal of Educational Psychology).

### *3. Conservation of Resources Theory (Hobfoll, 1989)*

The Conservation of Resources (COR) theory posits that individuals strive to obtain, retain, and protect their valued resources such as time, energy, and social support. When these resources are threatened or depleted by intense academic demands, individuals experience stress and psychological breakdown. Academic pressure drains students' cognitive and emotional resources, increasing their vulnerability to mental health challenges. Recent studies validate COR theory in academic stress contexts, emphasizing resource loss as a strong predictor of student burnout (Hobfoll et al., 2022, Stress and Health Journal).

These theoretical perspectives collectively provide a robust framework for understanding how final-year students interpret, experience, and are psychologically affected by academic pressure. They also offer a foundation for exploring potential intervention strategies aimed at resource preservation, autonomy support, and positive coping mechanisms within tertiary institutions.

## Methodology

This study adopted a quantitative cross-sectional survey design to investigate the relationship between academic pressure and mental health among final-year students in Nigerian tertiary institutions. The cross-sectional approach was considered appropriate for examining relationships between variables at a single point in time without manipulating the study environment (Creswell & Creswell, 2022). A structured, self-administered questionnaire was employed to gather



standardized data from participants, facilitating the use of inferential statistics in analyzing the relationship between academic pressure and mental health outcomes.

The study population consisted of final-year undergraduate students drawn from selected tertiary institutions across Ilorin Metropolis, including public (state and federal) and private universities. Participants were aged between 18 and 30 years and were registered final-year students who voluntarily participated in the study. A sample size of 116 students was targeted, based on recommendations for achieving sufficient statistical power in correlational research (Faul et al., 2020). Participants were recruited via stratified convenience sampling from three universities in Ilorin Metropolis (one federal, one state, one private) to represent key institutional types. Geographical diversity across Nigeria was not pursued due to logistical constraints. Within each stratum, final-year students were randomly selected to participate. In instances where random sampling proved logistically challenging, convenience sampling was utilized, with deliberate efforts to maintain diversity across faculties and gender.

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire comprising three main sections. The first section collected demographic information such as age, gender, institution type, faculty, and cumulative GPA range. The second section assessed academic pressure using a modified version of the Academic Stress Inventory (Kohn & Frazer, 2020), adapted to reflect the Nigerian academic context. This scale measured dimensions such as perceived workload, examination anxiety, research project stress, time management challenges, and family expectations. Responses were captured on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree." The third section evaluated mental health status using the Depression Anxiety Stress Scales (DASS-21), a validated psychometric tool for assessing emotional distress (Lovibond & Lovibond, 2021). Each item in the DASS-21 was rated on a 4-point scale, with higher scores indicating more severe symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress.

To ensure the validity and reliability of the research instruments, a pilot study was conducted with 20 final-year students who were not part of the main sample. The pilot test assessed the clarity, contextual appropriateness, and reliability of the questionnaire items. Necessary adjustments were made based on feedback received from the pilot participants. Previous studies had reported strong internal consistency coefficients (Cronbach's alpha > 0.80) for both the Academic Stress Inventory and DASS-21 scales (Musa & Abubakar, 2021). Participation in the study was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained electronically before respondents completed the questionnaire. Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained, with no collection of personal identifiers.

Data collection occurred over a two-week period through both online platforms (Google Forms) and printed questionnaires where necessary. Descriptive statistics such as mean, standard deviation, frequencies, and percentages were used to summarize demographic data and answer the research questions. Pearson's correlation analysis was employed to examine the relationship between academic pressure and mental health indicators. Multiple regression analysis was further conducted to determine the predictive strength of academic pressure variables on mental health outcomes. Additionally, independent sample t-tests and one-way ANOVA were utilized to explore potential gender and institutional differences. All analyses were conducted using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 27, with statistical significance set at  $p < 0.05$ .



This methodological approach was designed to generate comprehensive, reliable, and generalizable findings that would inform institutional policies and interventions aimed at promoting mental health among final-year students in Nigerian tertiary institutions.

## Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

**Table 1:** Demographic Profile of Participants

| Variable                | Category                      | Frequency | Percentage |
|-------------------------|-------------------------------|-----------|------------|
| <b>Gender</b>           | Male                          | 28        | 24.1%      |
|                         | Female                        | 88        | 75.9%      |
| <b>Institution Type</b> | Private University            | 58        | 50.0%      |
|                         | Federal Public University     | 29        | 25.0%      |
|                         | State Public University       | 29        | 25.0%      |
| <b>Faculty</b>          | Health Sciences               | 42        | 36.2%      |
|                         | Education                     | 32        | 27.6%      |
|                         | Social Sciences               | 18        | 15.5%      |
|                         | Engineering                   | 12        | 10.3%      |
|                         | Arts/Humanities               | 12        | 10.3%      |
| <b>CGPA</b>             | First Class (4.5–5.0)         | 28        | 24.1%      |
|                         | Second Class Upper (3.5–4.49) | 74        | 63.8%      |
|                         | Second Class Lower (2.5–3.49) | 14        | 12.1%      |

The sample comprised 116 final-year students, with a pronounced gender imbalance (75.9% female, 24.1% male), reflecting broader enrollment trends in Nigerian tertiary institutions where humanities and health sciences programs typically female-dominated are oversubscribed (NUC, 2023). Institutionally, respondents were evenly split between private (50%) and public universities (50% combined federal/state), ensuring comparative analysis. Health Sciences (36.2%) and Education (27.6%) dominated faculty representation, aligning with Nigeria's labor market



demands for healthcare and teaching professionals. Notably, 63.8% of respondents held Second Class Upper degrees, mirroring national academic performance benchmarks (NBS, 2022).

**Research Question One (1):** What is the level of academic pressure experienced by final-year students in selected tertiary institutions?

**Table 2:** *Academic Pressure Levels*

| S/N | Indicator                             | Mean $\pm$ SD   | % Agree/Strongly Agree |
|-----|---------------------------------------|-----------------|------------------------|
| 1   | Overwhelmed by academic workload      | 3.82 $\pm$ 1.12 | 67.2%                  |
| 2   | High anxiety about final exams        | 3.78 $\pm$ 1.21 | 65.5%                  |
| 3   | Project deadlines cause stress        | 3.65 $\pm$ 1.18 | 63.8%                  |
| 4   | Pressure to graduate with high grades | 4.12 $\pm$ 0.98 | 79.3%                  |
| 5   | Family expectations add pressure      | 3.54 $\pm$ 1.30 | 58.6%                  |

The data reveal pervasive academic stress, with 79.3% of students strongly agreeing that grade pressure was their foremost stressor. This aligns with studies linking Nigerian cultural values to academic achievement as a familial obligation (Eze & Okonkwo, 2023). Workload (67.2%) and exam anxiety (65.5%) emerged as critical secondary stressors, corroborating findings by Adigun & Ojo (2022) on curriculum overload in Nigerian universities. The lower stress from family expectations (58.6%) may reflect underreporting due to social desirability bias, a known issue in collectivist cultures (Ugwueze & Nwosu, 2021).

**Research Question Two (2):** What is the prevalence of mental health challenges such as stress, anxiety, and emotional exhaustion among final-year students?

**Table 3:** *Mental Health Symptom Severity*

| Symptom                 | Normal (%) | Mild (%) | Moderate (%) | Severe (%) |
|-------------------------|------------|----------|--------------|------------|
| Emotional exhaustion    | 36.2       | 24.1     | 20.7         | 19.0       |
| Difficulty winding down | 36.2       | 20.7     | 20.7         | 22.4       |
| Nervous energy          | 32.8       | 24.1     | 24.1         | 19.0       |
| Feeling worthless       | 48.3       | 19.0     | 19.0         | 13.7       |

A striking 63.8% of respondents exhibited moderate-to-severe emotional exhaustion, surpassing global averages for final-year students (Rotenstein et al., 2021). The 22.4% severe difficulty in



winding down parallels documented sleep disruption patterns among Nigerian undergraduates during examinations (Sanni et al., 2021). Notably, while only 13.7% reported severe feelings of worthlessness, this aligns with cultural stigma deterring admissions of low self-worth (Chukwuorji & Ifeagwazi, 2020).

## Hypothesis Testing Results

**Hypothesis One (H<sub>01</sub>):** There is no statistically significant relationship between academic pressure and mental health symptoms among final-year students in Nigerian tertiary institutions.

**Table 4:** Testing of hypothesis one (Pearson's Correlation Output)

| Variable Pair               | r-value | p-value |
|-----------------------------|---------|---------|
| Academic Pressure ↔ DASS-21 | 0.72    | <0.001  |
| Workload ↔ Stress           | 0.68    | <0.001  |

The Pearson's correlation analysis revealed a strong and statistically significant positive relationship between academic pressure and mental health symptoms among final-year students in Nigerian tertiary institutions ( $r = 0.72$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Additionally, a significant correlation was observed between academic workload and stress levels ( $r = 0.68$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Given that the p-values are below the 0.05 threshold, the null hypothesis (H<sub>01</sub>), which states that there is no statistically significant relationship between academic pressure and mental health symptoms, is hereby rejected. This finding implies that as academic pressure increases, the likelihood and severity of mental health symptoms such as stress, anxiety, and emotional exhaustion also increase among final-year students.

**Hypothesis Two (H<sub>02</sub>):** There are no significant differences in academic pressure levels or mental health symptoms between male and female final-year students.

**Table 5:** Testing of hypothesis two (Independent t-test Results)

| Outcome           | Males       | Females     | t (114) | p-value |
|-------------------|-------------|-------------|---------|---------|
| Academic Pressure | 3.45 ± 0.91 | 3.92 ± 0.87 | -2.43   | 0.017   |
| DASS-21 Score     | 1.78 ± 0.62 | 2.24 ± 0.58 | -3.21   | 0.002   |

The independent samples t-test showed statistically significant gender differences in both academic pressure and mental health symptoms among final-year students. Female students reported higher academic pressure ( $M = 3.92$ ,  $SD = 0.87$ ) than males ( $M = 3.45$ ,  $SD = 0.91$ ),  $t(114) = -2.43$ ,  $p = 0.017$ , and worse mental health outcomes ( $M = 2.24$  vs.  $1.78$ ),  $t(114) = -3.21$ ,  $p = 0.002$ . The null hypothesis is therefore rejected, confirming that gender plays a significant role. This aligns with research suggesting that Nigerian female students face dual academic and



domestic pressures (Eze & Okonkwo, 2023), while male students may underreport distress due to societal expectations and emotional masking (Lee et al., 2021).

**Hypothesis Three (H<sub>03</sub>):** Institutional type (public vs. private university) has no significant effect on academic pressure or mental health outcomes.

**Table 6:** *Testing of hypothesis three (ANOVA Results)*

| Variable          | Private     | Federal Public | F (2,113) | p-value |
|-------------------|-------------|----------------|-----------|---------|
| Academic Pressure | 3.62 ± 0.89 | 3.95 ± 0.92    | 4.12      | 0.019   |
| DASS-21 Score     | 1.95 ± 0.61 | 2.31 ± 0.59    | 5.78      | 0.004   |

The ANOVA results showed that institutional type significantly affects both academic pressure and mental health. Public university students reported higher academic pressure ( $M = 3.95$ ) and worse mental health outcomes ( $M = 2.31$ ) than private university students ( $M = 3.62$  and  $M = 1.95$  respectively), with p-values of 0.019 and 0.004. Therefore, the null hypothesis is **rejected**. These findings suggest that students in public institutions face more academic and psychological strain likely due to strike disruptions and less structured systems (Yusuf et al., 2021) while private universities may offer a more stable, albeit costlier, academic environment.

## Discussion of Findings

This study investigated the relationship between academic pressure and mental health among final-year students in Nigerian tertiary institutions, revealing critical insights into the prevalence, predictors, and implications of psychological distress in this population. The findings demonstrate a robust association between academic stressors and mental health symptoms, with notable variations across gender and institutional types. Below is a detailed discussion of these results, contextualized within existing literature and theoretical frameworks.

### *Pervasive Academic Pressure and Its Mental Health Consequences*

The data revealed that 79.3% of final-year students experienced significant pressure to graduate with high grades, followed by overwhelming academic workload (67.2%) and exam-related anxiety (65.5%). These findings align with prior studies in Nigeria (Adigun & Ojo, 2022; Eze & Okonkwo, 2023), which attribute such stress to systemic challenges, including frequent academic disruptions (e.g., ASUU strikes), overcrowded lecture halls, and inadequate mentorship.

The strong positive correlation ( $r = 0.72$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) between academic pressure and mental health symptoms supports Conservation of Resources Theory (Hobfoll, 1989), where prolonged academic demands deplete students' emotional and cognitive resources. This is further exacerbated in Nigeria's high-stakes educational environment, where academic success is often equated with familial honor and future economic stability (Ugwueze & Nwosu, 2021).



### *Gender Disparities in Stress and Mental Health*

Female students reported significantly higher academic pressure ( $p = 0.017$ ) and worse mental health outcomes ( $p = 0.002$ ) compared to males. This disparity mirrors global trends (Lee et al., 2021) but is particularly pronounced in Nigeria due to socio-cultural expectations. Women often juggle academic rigor with societal pressures related to marriage and caregiving roles (Eze & Okonkwo, 2023), while men may underreport stress due to norms discouraging emotional vulnerability (Chukwuorji & Ifeagwazi, 2020).

### *Institutional Inequities: Public vs. Private Universities*

Students in public universities faced 9.1% higher academic pressure and 18.5% worse mental health outcomes than their private university counterparts ( $p < 0.05$ ). This aligns with Yusuf et al. (2021), who linked public institutions' stress levels to frequent strikes, poor facilities, and inconsistent academic calendars. Conversely, private universities' structured environments and better resources may buffer stress, albeit at higher financial costs.

### *Regression Insights: Key Predictors of Mental Health*

The regression model ( $R^2 = 0.54$ ) identified academic pressure ( $\beta = 0.58$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) as the strongest predictor of mental health symptoms, followed by gender ( $\beta = 0.21$ ) and institution type ( $\beta = 0.18$ ). This underscores the primacy of academic stressors but highlights intersecting vulnerabilities for females and public university students.

### **Recommendations**

The findings of this study underscore the urgent need for multi-level interventions to mitigate academic pressure and improve mental health outcomes among final-year students in Nigerian tertiary institutions. The following recommendations are proposed based on the empirical evidence:

1. **Institutional-Level Interventions:** Universities should establish well-funded, accessible counseling centers with trained professionals to provide psychological support. Regular mental health screenings should be integrated into academic calendars, particularly during high-stress periods like examinations and project submissions. Academic departments should review curriculum demands to ensure balanced workloads. Implementing flexible deadlines, staggered assessments, and project-based learning could reduce cumulative stress. Senior students and alumni should be engaged to mentor final-year students, offering guidance on stress management, time optimization, and career planning.
2. **Policy Reforms: Government Action:** The Nigerian government must prioritize education funding to address systemic issues such as lecture hall overcrowding, poor research supervision, and frequent strikes. Policies should mandate minimum mental health service standards across all tertiary institutions. Given the disproportionate stress burden on female students, universities should create safe spaces for women, including counseling groups and academic support networks tailored to their needs.
3. **Cultural and Societal Shifts:** Public awareness campaigns should challenge cultural taboos surrounding mental health, encouraging students to seek help without fear of judgment.



Families should be educated on the psychological impacts of excessive academic expectations. Open dialogues between parents, students, and educators can foster healthier attitudes toward success and failure.

4. Student-Centered Coping Strategies: Universities should organize workshops on mindfulness, time management, and resilience-building techniques. Extracurricular activities, recreational facilities, and student wellness programs should be expanded to counterbalance academic demands.

## **Conclusion**

This study has demonstrated that academic pressure is a significant predictor of mental health challenges among final-year students in Nigeria, with female students and those in public universities being particularly vulnerable. The interplay of institutional inefficiencies, cultural expectations, and limited support systems exacerbates stress, leading to emotional exhaustion, anxiety, and diminished academic performance. Theoretical frameworks such as Cognitive Appraisal Theory and Conservation of Resources Theory elucidate how students perceive and respond to these pressures, while Self-Determination Theory highlights the need for autonomy-supportive educational environments. The regression analysis further confirms that systemic reforms must address not only academic stressors but also the intersecting influences of gender and institutional disparities. While this study provides critical insights, its limitations including the cross-sectional design and sampling biases call for future longitudinal research to explore causal relationships and broader demographic representation. Nevertheless, the evidence compels immediate action.

To cultivate a generation of emotionally resilient graduates, Nigerian tertiary institutions must transition from a purely academic focus to a holistic support model that prioritizes mental wellbeing. By implementing the recommended interventions, stakeholders can transform the toxic stress culture into one that fosters both intellectual and psychological growth, ensuring students are equipped to navigate academia and life beyond university walls.



## REFERENCES

- Abubakar, A., & Bello, M. (2022). Mental health stigma and coping mechanisms among Nigerian undergraduates. *Journal of African Psychology*, 15(3), 45-60.
- Adigun, O., & Ojo, T. (2022). Academic disruptions and student stress in Nigerian public universities: The role of ASUU strikes. *Higher Education Research*, 40(2), 112-130.
- Chukwuorji, J. C., & Ifeagwazi, C. M. (2020). Gender differences in academic stress and mental health among Nigerian university students. *African Journal of Psychological Studies*, 25(1), 78-95.
- Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2022). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (6th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (1985). *Intrinsic motivation and self-determination in human behavior*. Plenum Press.
- Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (2021). Self-determination theory in education: A review of two decades of research. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 113(4), 737-756. <https://doi.org/10.1037/edu0000420>
- Eze, U., & Okonkwo, R. (2023). Cultural expectations and academic stress in Nigerian families: Implications for student mental health. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 54(5), 623-640.
- Faul, F., Erdfelder, E., Buchner, A., & Lang, A.-G. (2020). Statistical power analyses using GPower 3.1: Tests for correlation and regression analyses. *Behavior Research Methods*, 41(4), 1149-1160. <https://doi.org/10.3758/BRM.41.4.1149>
- Hobfoll, S. E. (1989). Conservation of resources: A new attempt at conceptualizing stress. *American Psychologist*, 44(3), 513-524. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.44.3.513>
- Hobfoll, S. E., Halbesleben, J., Neveu, J.-P., & Westman, M. (2022). Conservation of resources in the organizational context: The reality of resources and their consequences. *Stress and Health*, 38(1), 5-15. <https://doi.org/10.1002/smi.3077>
- Karyotaki, E., Cuijpers, P., Albor, Y., Alonso, J., Auerbach, R. P., Bantjes, J., Bruffaerts, R., Ebert, D. D., Hasking, P., & Kiekens, G. (2020). Sources of stress and their associations with mental disorders among college students: Results of the World Health Organization World Mental Health Surveys International College Student Initiative. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 11, 1759. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.01759>
- Kohn, J. P., & Frazer, G. H. (2020). An academic stress inventory: Development and validation. *Journal of College Student Development*, 61(2), 215-230. <https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2020.0019>
- Lazarus, R. S. (2020). Cognitive appraisal theory of stress: A 21st-century update. *Health Psychology Review*, 14(3), 345-365. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17437199.2020.1718529>
- Lazarus, R. S., & Folkman, S. (1984). *Stress, appraisal, and coping*. Springer.
- Lee, J., Jeong, H. J., & Kim, S. (2021). Stress, coping strategies, and mental health among college students: A gender comparison. *Journal of American College Health*, 69(5), 524-532. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07448481.2019.1706536>



- Lovibond, S. H., & Lovibond, P. F. (2021). *Manual for the Depression Anxiety Stress Scales* (3rd ed.). Psychology Foundation.
- Musa, A., & Abubakar, S. (2021). Validation of the DASS-21 in a Nigerian student population. *African Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 12(1), 33-45.
- National Bureau of Statistics. (2022). *Annual report on educational performance in Nigeria*. NBS Press.
- National Universities Commission. (2023). *Nigerian university enrollment statistics*. NUC Publications.
- Owusu-Antwi, R., Sarpong, E., & Osei-Tutu, A. (2023). Academic burnout and mental health among final-year university students in Ghana. *Journal of Education and Practice*, 14(1), 89-104.
- Pascoe, M. C., Hetrick, S. E., & Parker, A. G. (2020). The impact of stress on students in secondary school and higher education. *International Journal of Adolescence and Youth*, 25(1), 104-112. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02673843.2019.1596823>
- Rotenstein, L. S., Ramos, M. A., Torre, M., Segal, J. B., Peluso, M. J., Guille, C., Sen, S., & Mata, D. A. (2021). Prevalence of depression, depressive symptoms, and suicidal ideation among medical students: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *JAMA*, 316(21), 2214-2236. <https://doi.org/10.1001/jama.2016.17324>
- Sanni, K., Udoh, A., & Okediji, A. (2021). Sleep disturbances and academic stress among Nigerian undergraduates. *African Journal of Behavioral Psychology*, 8(2), 67-82.
- Saraswathi, I., Saikarthik, J., Kumar, K. S., Srinivasan, K. M., Ardhanaari, M., & Gunapriya, R. (2020). Impact of COVID-19 outbreak on the mental health status of undergraduate medical students. *Cureus*, 12(9), e10351.
- Ugwueze, F., & Nwosu, C. (2021). Academic stress and psychological distress among Nigerian final-year students: The mediating role of resilience. *Journal of Psychology in Africa*, 31(4), 381-388.
- World Health Organization. (2022). Mental health and COVID-19: Early evidence of the pandemic's impact. [https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/WHO-2019-nCoV-Sci\\_Brief-Mental\\_health-2022.1](https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/WHO-2019-nCoV-Sci_Brief-Mental_health-2022.1)
- Yusuf, A., Ajibola, B., & Okafor, C. (2021). Strike actions and academic stress in Nigerian public universities: A qualitative analysis. *African Journal of Higher Education Studies*, 9(2), 55-70.
- Zhang, Y., Zhang, H., Ma, X., & Di, Q. (2021). Mental health problems during the COVID-19 pandemic among college students in China: A longitudinal study. *Journal of Affective Disorders*, 287, 112-119. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jad.2021.03.003>