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# Academic Stress and Coping Strategies of Students in the Context of the New Learning Modality

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***Abstract:*** *The abrupt shift to new learning modalities brought by the COVID-19 pandemic created significant challenges for students, particularly in terms of academic stress and the coping strategies they employed to adapt. This study aimed to examine the level of perceived academic stress among senior high school students and determine its relationship with their coping strategies. A total of 263 students participated in the study. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics to measure the levels of academic stress across four dimensions, academic self-perceptions, pressure to perform, perceptions of workload, and time restraints, and to assess coping strategies classified as rational, detached, emotional, and avoidance. Pearson product–moment correlation was employed to identify the relationships between academic stress and coping strategies. Findings revealed that students had high academic self-perceptions, but only moderate levels of stress related to workload, time restraints, and pressure to perform. In coping, they relied more on rational, detached, and avoidance strategies, while emotional coping was less evident. Significant positive correlations were observed between stress dimensions and specific coping strategies, with rational and detached coping emerging as the most adaptive mechanisms. It is concluded that students generally maintain positive self-perceptions and use adaptive strategies to manage academic demands under the new learning environment. Strengthening rational and detached coping may further enhance resilience, while addressing time management challenges could reduce stress levels. Schools are encouraged to design support programs that promote effective coping skills and provide flexible academic guidance to help students sustain their well-being and academic performance.*

**Keywords:** Academic Stress, Coping Strategies, New Learning Modality

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The transition to new learning modalities during the COVID-19 pandemic has posed significant challenges to administrators, teachers, students, and parents in sustaining education despite the crisis. In this context, students' mental health and well-being have become critical to ensuring safety and learning continuity. To address these concerns, the Department of Education (2020) has issued guidelines to protect and promote students' mental welfare, emphasizing the role of schools, parents, and guardians in creating supportive environments.

Stress is commonly defined as the perception of an imbalance between external demands and available coping resources (Vermunt & Steensman, 2005; Topper, 2007; Malach-Pines & Keinan, 2007). When severe, stress can impair academic performance, reduce engagement in academic activities, and increase the risk of maladaptive behaviors such as substance abuse (Richlin-Klonsky & Hoe, 2003). Academic stress, in particular, is associated with mental distress related to achievement, workload, and self-perception (Bedewy & Gabriel, 2015). It is also a major factor influencing school retention and dropout rates (Elias, Ping, & Abdullah, 2011). Its symptoms—such as anxiety, depression, disrupted sleep, and poor lifestyle habits—have been well-documented across diverse student populations (Backović et al., 2012; Schraml et al., 2011). Evidence further suggests that stress negatively affects health-related quality of life and is consistently linked to reduced academic performance (Dusselier et al., 2005; Misra & McKean, 2000). For instance, stress has been shown to interfere with working memory, impairing students' ability to process and execute academic tasks (Beilock, 2008), and has been directly correlated with poor performance outcomes (Sohail, 2013).

Coping, broadly defined as efforts to manage perceived threats that exceed one's resources (Monat & Lazarus, 1991), plays a crucial role in mitigating the adverse effects of academic stress. Students adopt diverse coping strategies that vary in effectiveness, and these approaches can significantly influence both their academic performance and psychological resilience. However, while research has established links between stress, coping, and academic outcomes, limited studies have specifically examined how students in secondary education cope with academic stress within the context of newly implemented learning modalities, particularly in developing countries.

This study addresses this gap by investigating the perceived academic stress and coping strategies of Junior and Senior High School students at Casisang National High School under the new learning modality. Specifically, it explores which coping strategies are mostly related in managing academic stress.

## 2. METHODS

### 2.1 Research Design

This study employed a descriptive-correlational research design. Descriptive research was utilized to determine the levels of students perceived academic stress and coping strategies, while correlational analysis was applied to examine the relationship between these variables. This design is appropriate because the study does not involve manipulation of variables but rather seeks to describe existing conditions and identify associations between students' stress levels and their coping mechanisms.

### 2.2 Participants and Sampling

The population consisted of 629 Junior and Senior High School students enrolled at Casisang National High School during the school year 2020–2021. Using Slovin's formula at a 5% margin of error, the computed sample size was 371. A stratified random sampling technique was applied to ensure representation across grade levels. From each stratum, samples were proportionally allocated per section.

### 2.3 Research Instrument

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire divided into three sections. The first section contained a letter of intent and a brief student profile, which included information such as gender, grade level, and strand. The second section utilized the Perceived Academic Stress Scale (PASS), adapted from Bedewy and Gabriel (2015). This 18-item scale measures students' perceptions of academic stress and has an established internal consistency reliability of 0.70. Responses were rated on a five-point Likert scale: Strongly Relevant (5), Relevant (4), Slightly Relevant (3), Irrelevant (2), and Extremely Irrelevant (1). Positively worded items were scored directly, whereas negatively worded items were reverse-coded.

The third section employed the Coping Strategies Scale (CSS), adapted from Roger, Jarvis, and Najarian (1993). This 60-item instrument measures students' coping strategies and has demonstrated a Cronbach's alpha of 0.80, indicating good reliability. Responses were rated on a four-point Likert scale: Always (4), Often (3), Sometimes (2), and Never (1), with reverse scoring applied to negatively worded items.

### 2.4 Data Gathering Procedure

Prior to data collection, approval was secured from the schools division superintendent. With assistance from subject teachers, parents were informed about the study and provided consent forms. Questionnaires, along with letters of intent and consent, were placed in sealed envelopes and distributed to parents/guardians at designated classrooms. Students completed the questionnaires at home with parental consent. After one week, the accomplished questionnaires were collected by the researcher for analysis.

### 2.5 Statistical Treatment

Descriptive statistics, including mean and standard deviation, were used to determine the levels of students perceived academic stress and coping strategies. To examine the relationship between the two variables, Pearson's product-moment correlation coefficient (r) was employed. This statistical test is suitable for determining the strength and direction of linear relationships between continuous variables.

## 3. RESULTS AND DICUSSIONS

The results revealed that rational coping obtained the highest mean (M = 2.84, SD = .369), which indicates that students often adopt positive, problem-focused approaches when dealing with academic stress. This suggests that students view academic challenges as opportunities to be addressed step by step, reflecting resilience and optimism in adapting to modular distance learning during the pandemic. The finding highlights the importance of rational coping in enabling learners to maintain a constructive outlook despite external pressures.

Detached coping was also rated high (M = 2.57, SD = .370), signifying that students tend to handle difficulties with independence and self-regulation. The modular distance learning setup, which requires students to work with printed self-learning modules and limited teacher interaction, may have encouraged them to develop greater responsibility and autonomy. High scores in detached coping

suggest that students approach problems without being overwhelmed by emotional responses, allowing them to stay focused on academic requirements.

In contrast, emotional coping received a low rating (M = 2.38, SD = .402). This indicates that students generally avoid emotional responses such as crying, isolation, or feelings of helplessness when facing academic stress. Although the bulk of activities in modular learning can be overwhelming, students appeared to demonstrate emotional restraint, maintaining optimism and perseverance to meet academic requirements. This finding suggests that emotional expression was not a primary coping mechanism among respondents.

Finally, avoidance coping was rated high (M = 2.77, SD = .386), indicating that students often diverted their attention away from stressful tasks by engaging in alternative activities. This strategy may serve as a temporary relief from academic demands. Some students reported relying on faith and prayer as coping mechanisms, reflecting cultural and spiritual dimensions of stress management. While avoidance can reduce immediate stress, excessive reliance on it may hinder effective problem-solving if not balanced with constructive strategies.

The results of this study are consistent with earlier findings that highlight the role of leisure and alternative activities in coping with academic stress. Zuzanek, Zuzanek, Robinson, and Iwasaki (1998) found that leisure can reduce stress and promote well-being, while Park and Kim (2018) reported that students develop both positive and negative coping strategies to manage academic challenges. Similarly, Park, Kwon, et al. (2014) noted that active coping mediates the relationship between academic stress and school adjustment, underscoring the significance of adaptive coping in fostering resilience.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that students predominantly employ rational, detached, and avoidance coping strategies, while emotional coping is less frequently used. This suggests a tendency among learners to balance problem-focused approaches with temporary avoidance, reflecting both resilience and vulnerability in adapting to the demands of the new learning modality.

**Table 1.** Summary of the Mean and Standard Deviation of the Coping Strategies

| Coping Variables | Minimum | Maximum | Mean | SD | Descriptive Rating |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Rational | 2.00 | 3.73 | 2.84 | .369 | High |
| Detached | 1.73 | 3.47 | 2.57 | .370 | High |
| Emotional | 1.53 | 3.47 | 2.38 | .402 | Low |
| Avoidance | 1.71 | 3.86 | 2.77 | .386 | High |

Among the four dimensions, academic self-perceptions received the highest rating (M = 3.76, SD = .590, High). This suggests that students maintained a generally positive outlook on their academic performance despite the difficulties of transitioning to modular distance learning. Even under the challenges of the pandemic, learners expressed confidence in their ability to persevere and succeed. Such findings highlight resilience and adaptability in the face of shifting educational modalities.

In contrast, time restraints were rated only moderate (M = 3.16, SD = .502), indicating that many students struggled to balance the time needed to complete self-learning modules with other personal responsibilities. Unrealistic expectations and limited time to finish academic tasks contributed to stress. Nonetheless, students reported that they were still able to set aside moments for rest and relaxation, which may have helped mitigate the pressure of deadlines.

The dimension of pressure to perform was also rated moderate (M = 3.19, SD = .588). While modular learning placed students in a challenging position to meet expectations, they did not perceive excessive pressure from teachers, peers, or family members. One possible explanation is that these support systems understood the difficulties posed by the pandemic and provided encouragement rather than additional pressure. This reflects a shift toward empathy and support within the academic community during the transition to the new modality.

Similarly, perceptions of workload were rated moderate (M = 3.36, SD = .550). This suggests that students found the academic requirements manageable. The Department of Education's implementation of the Most Essential Learning Competencies (MELCs) may have contributed to this outcome, as modules were streamlined to reduce excessive demands. Students may have perceived the workload as appropriate to their capacity, requiring only minimal guidance from teachers.

**Table 2.** Summary of the Mean and Standard Deviation of the Perceived Academic Stress Dimensions

| Variables | Minimum | Maximum | Mean | SD | Descriptive Rating |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Pressure to Perform | 1.60 | 4.80 | 3.19 | .588 | Moderate |

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Perceptions of Workload | 2.00 | 4.75 | 3.36 | .550 | Moderate |
| Academic Self-Perceptions | 2.00 | 5.00 | 3.76 | .590 | High |
| Time Restraints | 1.80 | 4.60 | 3.16 | .502 | Moderate |

Moreover, the findings partially diverge from earlier studies that identified workload and performance pressure as major sources of stress. Kouzma and Kennedy (2004), for example, noted that heavy academic tasks and external expectations often heighten stress among high school students. However, the present results are supported by international studies (Liu, 2015; Liu & Lu, 2011; Shinto, 1998; Walburg, 2014), which consistently report that high academic stress is associated with reduced engagement and poorer learning outcomes. The moderate stress levels observed here suggest that the adjustments in curriculum design and the support of teachers and families may have buffered students from excessive academic strain during modular distance learning. Overall, these findings show that while students experienced moderate levels of pressure, workload concerns, and time constraints, their positive self-perceptions served as a protective factor in managing academic stress during the transition to the new learning modality.

Meanwhile, a significant positive relationship was found between pressure to perform and three coping strategies: detached coping ($r = .244$, $p < .01$), emotional coping ($r = .386$, $p < .01$), and avoidance coping ($r = .278$, $p < .01$). These results suggest that students employed different strategies to reduce feelings of academic pressure. For example, detached coping allowed them to downplay competition with peers, thereby minimizing performance-related stress. Emotional coping, on the other hand, provided an outlet to release tension through seeking support or self-expression. Avoidance coping indicated that students occasionally engaged in distraction or alternative activities to temporarily escape academic uncertainties while adapting to the new learning modality.

**Table 3**. Summary of the Relationship Between Coping Strategies and Perceived Academic Stress Dimensions

| Coping Variables | Pressure to Perform | | Perceptions of Workload | | Academic Self-Perceptions | | Time Restraints | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Pearson r | p-values | Pearson r | p-values | Pearson r | p-values | Pearson r | p-values |
| Rational (RATCOP) | .065 | .292 | .066 | .287 | .165** | .007 | .128* | .038 |
| Detached (DETCOP) | .244** | .000 | .193** | .002 | .122* | .047 | .260** | .000 |
| Emotional (EMCOP) | .386** | .000 | .342** | .000 | .040 | .521 | .178** | .004 |
| Avoidance (AVCOP) | .278** | .000 | .224** | .000 | .112 | .069 | .112 | .070 |

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).
*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

When examining perceptions of workload, significant correlations were observed with detached coping ($r = .193$, $p < .01$), emotional coping ($r = .342$, $p < .01$), and avoidance coping ($r = .224$, $p < .01$). These results imply that students responded to workload demands in both adaptive and maladaptive ways. Detached coping may have enabled them to reflect objectively on their tasks, perceiving module activities as manageable. Emotional coping suggested reliance on reassurance from teachers or peers to compensate for incomplete or late submissions, while avoidance coping indicated that students sometimes chose not to dwell on the quantity of tasks, thereby reducing their stress.

For academic self-perceptions, positive correlations emerged with rational coping ($r = .165$, $p < .01$) and detached coping ($r = .122$, $p < .05$). This finding highlights that student who engaged in rational coping—such as systematic planning, problem-solving, and confidence in their ability to learn—reported stronger academic self-beliefs. Detached coping also played a role, as students tended to view difficulties as temporary challenges rather than threats, enabling them to sustain motivation and positive outlooks in self-paced learning.

Lastly, time restraints showed significant positive correlations with rational coping ($r = .128$, $p < .05$), detached coping ($r = .260$, $p < .01$), and emotional coping ($r = .178$, $p < .01$). These results suggest that students utilized a combination of strategies to manage time pressure. Rational coping reflected the ability to organize schedules effectively in modular learning, where pacing was largely self-directed. Detached coping may have helped students remain composed when falling behind, while emotional coping indicated that they turned to relaxation or calming strategies to reduce time-related stress.

Overall, the findings reveal that students relied on both adaptive and non-adaptive strategies to deal with academic stress. Rational and detached coping were consistently associated with positive academic perceptions, while emotional and avoidance coping were linked to short-term relief of stressors such as workload and pressure to perform. These results align with previous studies showing that academic stress is closely tied to students' coping behaviors. International research (Liu, 2015; Liu & Lu, 2011; Shinto, 1998; Walburg, 2014) has consistently shown that high stress undermines motivation and engagement, while coping strategies moderate this relationship. Similarly, Kouzma and Kennedy (2004) emphasized that academic demands such as assessments, rankings, and expectations are significant stressors. However, the current findings also support Park and Kim (2018), who demonstrated that students employ strategic coping mechanisms to buffer the effects of academic stress.

Taken together, these results suggest that while students experienced stress across multiple dimensions, their ability to use rational and detached coping strategies allowed them to maintain positive academic self-perceptions. At the same time, reliance on emotional and avoidance coping highlights the need for interventions that encourage adaptive strategies to sustain academic engagement in challenging learning environments.

## 4. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Based on the findings, students exhibited high levels of rational, detached, and avoidance coping strategies, while emotional coping was low. In terms of academic stress, students reported high academic self-perceptions and moderate levels of pressure to perform, perceptions of workload, and time restraints. Correlation analysis showed that pressure to perform was significantly related to detached, emotional, and avoidance coping but not to rational coping. Perceptions of workload were significantly associated with detached, emotional, and avoidance coping, excluding rational coping. Academic self-perceptions were positively correlated with rational and detached coping. Lastly, time restraints were significantly associated with rational, detached, and emotional coping, but not with avoidance coping.

It is recommended that students may continue to strengthen rational coping strategies through practices such as effective time management, problem-solving, and self-regulation. While avoidance coping provided short-term relief, students should be guided to minimize overdependence on it and instead focus on more adaptive approaches to managing stress. Furthermore, teachers are encouraged to provide flexible deadlines and assign realistic workloads to reduce stress related to time restraints and performance pressure. Incorporating activities that build students' academic confidence is also necessary to sustain their positive self-perceptions despite the challenges of modular distance learning. In addition, school administrators may consider implementing structured intervention programs such as stress management workshops, peer mentoring, and counseling services. These programs can help foster adaptive coping strategies among students and provide additional support systems within the school environment. Also, parents and guardians play a crucial role in supporting students' well-being. Rather than emphasizing excessive performance expectations, families may focus on providing encouragement, understanding, and assistance in managing academic tasks at home.

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