

Social Support and Stress among University Students: A Correlational Study

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ABSTRACT

Students feel stress, an unfavorable state, during their study period. In order to reduce the impact of stress, students need social support. Therefore, the primary objectives of this study are to identify the various stressors affecting university students and examine the role of social support in mitigating the impact of stressors. In this cross-sectional study, conducted at the University of Dhaka, Bangladesh, data was collected from 393 students through a structured survey questionnaire. Frequency, percentage, mean, and standard deviation were calculated to identify the major stressors and sources of social support. At the same time, Pearson product-moment correlation and linear regression were run to determine the association between social support and stress. The study found that 'serious illness in family members' (mean=2.30, SD=1.588) was the most significant in the family-related domain. On the other hand, psychological stressors were led by 'misunderstood or rejected by others' (mean=1.79, SD=1.508), and Economic as well as Environmental stressors were dominated by 'major change in financial state' (mean=1.99, SD=1.321) and 'change in living environment' (mean=1.96, SD=1.242). A significant negative correlation ($r=-.168$, $n=393$, $p<0.001$) was found between perceived social support and stress. The findings of the study increase the necessity of social support systems in mitigating stress among university students.

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Introduction

Stress refers to unfavorable conditions that can originate from some unwanted phenomenon, exciting positive life events, unexpected experiences, the gap between demand and expectation, and so on. Indeed, when someone perceives a situation as threatening or exciting, he or she feels stress, which denotes the physiological and psychological reaction to the stressors that indulge individuals in fearful or anxious situations (Cockerham & Ritchey, 1997). Hans Selye, a classic scholar in stress-related study, defined stress as exposure to abominable ambient situations (Thoits, 2010). Almost in every sector, everyone may be confronted with different levels of stressful situations since these situations originate from our regular positive or negative life events. Similarly, university students can also be experienced stressful situations. The American Institute of Stress (AIS) reported that 08 out of 10 college students faced stress frequently, and 80% of students often felt stress (Tarsitano, 2019).

Several research findings revealed that university students faced stress from multiple domains, such as academic, psychological, economic as well as environmental, and so on. An empirical study showed a ranking of life events-related stressors on the basis of severity. According to this ranking, the top seven stressful life events were the demise of a father or mother, the departure of a best or close friend, a significant car accident, major personal injury or illness, being fired from college, major economic problems, the break-up between father and mother, as well as marriage or divorce respectively. Among these seven, each stressful life event was reported by 695 students (46.3%) among a total of 1500 respondents during the previous 12 months. On top of that, one-third of the participants reported experiencing financial difficulties, the loss of a close acquaintance, changing the health status of a family member significantly, or failing a course frequently as stressors (Sokratous et al., 2013). A large portion of university students come from rural areas to urban areas as well as from college to university in order to complete their higher studies. As a result, they have faced many problems in adjusting to a new culture. Many students do not have any relatives in new locations. They face stress in this situation because they live far from their family (Talwar & AR, 2013).

The findings of a qualitative study conducted at Management and Science University (MSU), Shah Alam, Malaysia, revealed that financial problems were reported as the primary source of stress. Furthermore, lack of sleep and familial problems were also the sources of stress (Aan et al., 2009). Stressors disrupt one's physical and mental well-being, and sometimes forced to commit suicide. Aachol Foundation conducted a survey on the basis of 150 national and local newspapers' suicidal reports. The study found that from January

to August 2022, within eight months, 364 students committed suicide, and among them, 50 students studied at university; the suicide rate was higher in the Dhaka division than in other divisions. According to this survey, conflict in romantic affairs was the prime cause of suicide, which was also the major source of stress along with academic stressors, including session jams, failing exams, and study pressure. In addition to this, depression, the death of friends, and financial problems are also the major sources of stress that force students to commit suicide (The Business Standard, 2022). Absence of social support, stress from academic work, monetary problems, and so on were also deemed as risk factors for suicide among Bangladeshi university students (Urme et al., 2022). The effects of the stressors, as well as the suicide rate, have been reduced through social support that indicates psychological or physical help from different kinds of sources such as friends, family members, special persons, the academic community, and so on (McLean et al., 2023). The finding of a study conducted in Malaysia found that family (mean= 5.21; SD= 1.48) gave the highest level of social support to the study population, and perceived stress and perceived social support were negatively associated (Abdul Aziz et al., 2023).

The growing stress level among students is a matter of great concern, today. However, there is not enough visible initiative to diminish the impact of stress through taking necessary steps, specifically giving social support in stressful conditions. Therefore, this study attempts:

- I. To identify the family-related stressors among university students.
- II. To discover the psychological stressors among university students.
- III. To disclose the economic and environmental stressors among university students.
- IV. To identify the sources of perceived social support among university students.
- V. To determine the association between social support and stress among university students.

Literature Review

Stressors denote the social forces or social factors that create stress among people. Earlier, the subject matter of research on stress was animals, where stress was defined as hostile environmental forces, such as excessive heat. On the other hand, today, the human subject is the main focus, and the identification of stressors is the prime concern of sociologists (Holmes & Rahe, 1967; Wheaton, 1999; cited in Carr & Umberson, 2013).

The findings of a study conducted in Eritrea found that insufficient educational facilities in the college created more stress among students in the academic domain. Similarly, the study also found that in terms of psychological stressors, irrational thoughts created the most stressful situations (Yikealo et al., 2018). Sajem (2014) also found that family problems (70%) and school problems (59.1%) were the two main sources of stress among students. On the other hand, Sharma and Kaur (2011) showed in their study that environmental factors (40%) were the most influential factors in causing stress among students. Among environmental factors, the top two factors were changes in the living environment and inadequate telephone facilities. Another study conducted in Australia found that lack of balance between different aspects of life, making poor decisions, conflict at home, at work, and housemates, lack of understanding of families, friends, lectures, career and study choices, and difficulty of making friends, difficulty of finding employment, and financial instability were the significant sources of stress (Logan & Burns, 2023).

Another study, conducted at the Shiraz University of Medical Sciences in Iran, found that lack of positive approval by others, fear of failure, dealing with new experience, and previous bad experience were the individual stressors among students. This study also revealed that academic pressure, economic instability, family concerns, and communication concerns were the most common sources of stress among students (Khademian et al., 2021).

Another study conducted in an Irish technological third-level institute revealed the academic, social, and family aspects of stress. The study found that over-identification with academic success, social inadequacy, and dealing with parental conflict were the three patterns of sources of stress (Aherne, 2012).

Several empirical studies on sources, as well as the association between perceived social support and stress, were conducted in different countries. A study conducted in Malaysia found that family (mean= 5.21; SD= 1.48) gave the highest level of social support to the study population. This study also found an inverse relationship between perceived social support and stress. The negative correlation between social support from significant others and friends and stress was low ($r = -0.328$, $P < 0.001$; $r = -0.219$, $P < 0.001$, respectively), while social support from family and stress had moderate ($r = -0.429$, $P < 0.001$) negative correlation (Abdul Aziz et al., 2023). The finding of another study conducted in one of the universities of Malaysia showed that social support and stress were negatively correlated, and the relationship was very low ($r = -0.43$; $p < 0.01$). This study also found that female students experienced less stress than male students. Another study conducted in Ireland

found a moderate negative correlation ($r=-0.331$, $n=312$, $p<0.01$) between perceived social support and stress (McLean et al., 2023). Another study, conducted on young adult smokers of Pacific Islander ancestry, found that the study participants received more support from significant others (mean= 5.4) than family (mean= 5.1) and friends (mean= 5.0). This study also found that perceived social support from family was negatively correlated with perceived stress related to helplessness (Kwan et al., 2023). The finding of a study conducted at Shahid Beheshti University of Medical Science showed that there was the inverse relationship between perceived stress and perceived social support ($r=-0.33$; $p,0.001$) (Ramezankhani et al., 2013).

After searching PubMed, DOAJ, Google Scholar, and ProQuest and reviewing almost enough studies on this topic, we found an area gap, which indicated that research on stress and its association with social support had not been conducted before at the University of Dhaka. Therefore, the study attempts to identify the probable stressors and their association with social support.

Theoretical Framework

In social psychology and medical sociology, many theories provide a framework for stress-related studies. In this study, the looking glass self-theory and definition of the situation were used to recheck the study findings. The relevance of the above theories presents below:

Charles H. Cooley's 'looking glass self' is an essential idea in any sociological examination of stress. As per looking glass self-theory, one could form one's sense of identity through interactions with others. According to Cooley, an individual experiences some sort of self-feeling (e.g., satisfaction, pride, humiliation) on the basis of how the other person sees and assesses him or herself. This theory contributes to our knowledge of stress by postulating that one's sense of self as a social object is shaped by the responses of others (Cockerham, 2016).

Similarly, William I. Thomas, an early contributor to the Chicago School of Sociology, views crises as resting in the person's definition of the situation. According to Thomas, a person's action is determined as a stressor on the basis of a defining process (Appelrouth & Edles, 2021). As per Thomas' definition, reaction to phenomena varies from individual to individual due to different defining processes. Additionally, the ability to modify the definition of a situation also varies through the mastery of an individual. In a word, the outcome of each given condition is entirely up to the one who defines it and responds to it (Cockerham, 2016). In this study, we used these two theoretical concepts as a primary appraisal of stressors as well as social support.

Conceptual Framework

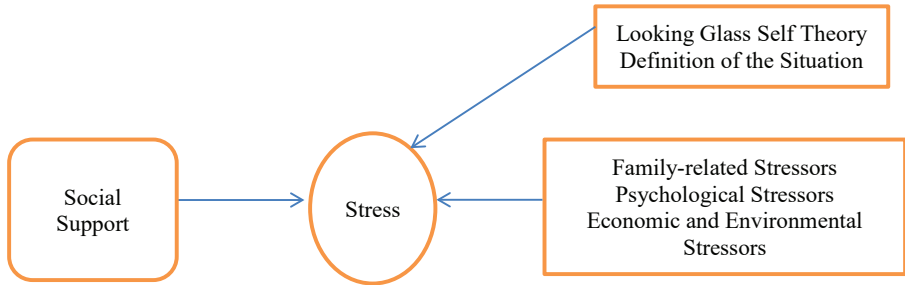


Figure 1: Conceptual framework and relationship among different variables

In this study, the prime dependent variable is stress, which is determined through family-related stressors, psychological stressors, and economic as well as environmental stressors. On the other hand, we assessed social support, the only independent variable of the study, through three sources, including family, friends, and significant others. On top of that, figure 1 also depicts that familial, psychological, and economic as well as environmental stressors were perceived through two theoretical concepts, including looking glass self and definition of the situation (See Figure 1).

Research Methodology

Study design and study settings

A cross-sectional study design was employed from April to May 2023 at the University of Dhaka, Bangladesh. According to its website, Dhaka University has 13 Faculties, 83 Departments, 13 Institutes, and 20 Residential Halls (University of Dhaka, n.d.).

Study population

This study targeted the graduate (Master's) and undergraduate (1st year to 4th year) students of the University of Dhaka. More specifically, the students of several departments under each faculty were chosen purposively for the current study.

Data collection

In the current study, a structured survey questionnaire was used for quantitative data collection. Both primary and secondary sources were used to collect data

for the study. For the primary source, the survey method was used, and for the secondary source, various books, journal articles, newspaper articles, and some other relevant literature were used. Four data collectors, except the researcher, collected the data from respondents. Before administering the survey, the researcher gave a brief description of the research objectives and took the signatures on the consent letter. Respondents filled out the questionnaire because it was a self-administered survey. However, sometimes, the data collector helps the participants understand the questions correctly.

Pilot survey

The data for the pilot survey was collected from February 5 to February 17. The sample size for this pilot survey was 30, which were selected purposively. Afterwards, data were entered into the SPSS. This pilot survey confirmed the normality of the data collected through this questionnaire. The pilot study showed the validity of the research objectives and questions.

Sampling and sample size determination

Convenience sampling was used to determine samples from the study population. The final sample size was 393, which was determined conveniently from different faculties, institutions, and years of study.

Construction of survey questionnaire

A structured survey schedule was prepared before conducting a survey. The schedule included three main sections and some sub-sections. The questionnaire included the following sections and sub-sections:

Socio-demographic characteristics

Socio-demographic characteristics were measured by a Socio-demographic questionnaire consisting of 5 indicators developed by the researcher based on a literature review. These indicators were age, gender, faculty enrolment, place of residence, and year of study.

Stress Scale

In this section, 12 stressors were selected from extended literature reviews that were relevant to the university students. These 12 stressors were classified into three sub-sections: family-related stressors (1-4), psychological stressors (5-8), and economic as well as environmental stressors (9-12).

Perceived Social Support Scale

The multidimensional scale of perceived social support was developed by Zimet et al. (1988), used in the present study. This scale was classified into three sub-scales, such as social support from family, friends, and significant others. Among 12 items, 3,4,8,11 for support from family, 6,7,9,12 for support from friends, and 1,2,5,10 for support from significant others (Zimet et al., 1988).

Reliability and validity

In this study, the alpha values of the stress scale and the multidimensional scale of perceived social support scales were .824 and .871, respectively, which indicated good reliability (see Table 1).

Table 1: The alpha value of scales

Scales	Number of Items	Alpha Value
Stress Scale	12	.824
Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support	12	.871

In addition, the association between stress and perceived social support was proven. Thus, the current study maintained the construct validity.

Statistical analysis

Descriptive and inferential statistics were applied to analyze the data using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) Software, Version 25. Socio-demographic characteristics were analyzed using descriptive statistics like frequency, percentage, mean, and standard deviation. Then, bivariate analysis was performed in order to find out the association between stress and social support. As a result, Pearson product-moment correlation and linear regression were performed to measure the association between stress and perceived social support.

Ethical considerations

A consent letter was added at the beginning of the survey questionnaire in order to get written consent from the study participants. Respondents gave their written consent and participated in this study voluntarily. The name, registration number, or any information through which a student could be identified was not included in the survey questionnaire in order to ensure anonymity. Similarly, to ensure confidentiality, only the respondents and the researchers have access to the survey questionnaire and other study instruments.

Findings of the Study

Socio-demographic characteristics of the participants

Demographic data showed that 65.90% of all respondents were between the ages of 21 and 23, indicating that this age group comprised the majority of respondents. In this study, 71.25% of the participants were male, indicating that the majority were male participants. In terms of the year of the study, the majority of respondents were from the third year (24.94%). Data were gathered from eight faculties and two institutes. The Arts faculty had the highest percentage of replies (24.68%) among all faculties and institutes. The Social Sciences faculty had the second-highest proportion of respondents (21.63%). However, 16.79% and 11.70% of all respondents were from the Business Administration and Science faculties, respectively. In addition to these faculties, the Earth and Environmental Sciences, Biological Sciences, Engineering and Technology, and Law faculty account for 2.80%, 2.29%, 2.54%, and 6.87% of all respondents, respectively. 72.01% of respondents resided on campus, which means they dwell in various halls. In contrast, 27.99% of all respondents lived outside the hall.

Family-related, psychological and economic as well as environmental stressors

University students have faced stress from many sources, which are called stressors. This study included family-related stressors, psychological stressors, and economic and environmental stressors.

Table 2: The Family related Stressors among the study participants (n=393)

Family Related Stressors	Mean	Std. Deviation
Serious Illness in Family Members	2.30	1.588
Conflict with Parents	1.56	1.538
Domestic Violence	1.30	1.598
Physical Punishment by Parents	.78	1.218

The current study found that 'serious illness in family members' (mean= 2.30, Std. Deviation= 1.588) accounted for creating more stress than 'conflict with parents' (mean= 1.56, Std. Deviation= 1.538), 'domestic violence' (mean= 1.30, Std. Deviation= 1.598), and 'physical punishment by parents' (mean= .78, Std. Deviation= 1.218) among family related stressors (see table-2). In comparison to other family-related stressors, the study found that 'physical punishment by parents' (mean= .78, Std. Deviation= 1.218) created less stress among the study participants (See table 2).

Table 3: The Psychological Stressors among the study participants (n=393)

Psychological Stressors	Mean	Std. Deviation
Misunderstood or Rejected by Others	1.79	1.508
Conflict with Own Beliefs	1.73	1.431
Frightened	1.64	1.308
Cheated or Ridiculed	1.44	1.456

Table 3 presents that the most common psychological stressor among university students was 'misunderstood or rejected by others' (mean= 1.79, Std. Deviation= 1.508). On the other hand, Respondents reported that 'cheated or ridiculed' (mean= 1.44, Std. Deviation= 1.456) created less stress than other psychological stressors.

Table 4: The Economic and Environmental Stressors among the study participants (n=393)

Economic and Environmental Stressors	Mean	Std. Deviation
Major Change in Financial State	1.99	1.321
Change in Living Environment	1.96	1.242
Unwanted Political Pressure	1.94	1.566
Adapting in the Hall Environment	1.81	1.439

The finding of the current study also revealed that 'major change in financial state' (mean= 1.99, Std. Deviation= 1.321) was a highly reported stressor while 'adapting to the hall environment' (mean= 1.81, Std. Deviation= 1.439) was less reported stressors among economic and environmental stressors (see table-4).

Table 5: The severity of Stressors by Mean Scores with Descending Orders of the study participants in the University of Dhaka, Bangladesh, 2023 (n=393)

SL NO.	Sources of Stress	Mean	Std. Deviation
01	Serious Illness in Family Members	2.30	1.588
02	Major Change in Financial State	1.99	1.321
03	Change in Living Environment	1.96	1.242
04	Unwanted Political Pressure	1.94	1.566
05	Adapting in the Hall Environment	1.81	1.439
06	Misunderstood or Rejected by Others	1.79	1.508
07	Conflict with own Belief	1.73	1.431

08	Frightened	1.64	1.308
09	Conflict with Parents	1.56	1.538
10	Cheated or Ridiculed	1.44	1.456
11	Domestic Violence	1.30	1.598
12	Physical Punishment by Parents	.78	1.218

The present study discovered that the top five stressors were ‘serious illness in family members’ (mean= 2.30, Std. Deviation= 1.588), ‘major change in financial state’(mean= 1.99, Std. Deviation= 1.321), ‘change in living environment’(mean= 1.96, Std. Deviation= 1.242), ‘unwanted political pressure’(mean= 1.94, Std. Deviation= 1.566), and ‘adapting in the hall environment’(mean= 1.81, Std. Deviation= 1.439) (see table-5).

Sources of Perceived Social Support

Table 6: The sources of perceived social support of the study participants (n=393)

Sub-scale of MSPSS	Mean	Std. Deviation
Social Support from Family	22.60	4.921
Social Support from Friends	20.22	4.964
Social Support from Significant Others	19.34	6.275

The present study’s findings revealed that the study participants received social support from different sources, such as family, friends, and significant others, to reduce the impacts of stressors. Table-6 presents that the participants received more social support from family (mean=22.60, Std. Deviation=4.921) than friends (mean=20.22, Std. Deviation=4.964) and significant others (mean=19.34, Std. Deviation=6.275) (see Table 6).

The association between perceived social support and stress

Table 7: The association between stress and the multidimensional scale of perceived social support

	Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support	Stress	P Value
Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support	1	-.168*	.001
Stress	-.168*	1	

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

The current study found that perceived social support and perceived stress were significantly correlated. There was a little negative correlation between perceived social support and perceived stress ($r = -.168$, $n = 393$, $p < 0.001$), which indicated that if perceived social support increases, the degree of stress will decrease, on the other hand, if perceived social support decreases, the degree of stress will increase among the study participants.

Table 8: Linear regression between perceived social support and stress among university students

Variables	Coefficient	Std. Err.	T	P> t	[95% Conf. Interval]
Perceived Social Support					
Poor Social Support	1.00				
Good Social Support	-3.23	1.05	-3.08	0.002	-5.29, -1.17

We also run linear regression and found a significant model, $F(1,391) = 9.48$, $p < 0.002$, $R^2 = 0.0237$. Table-08 demonstrates that students with good social support were 3.23 times less perceiving stress (95% CI = -5.29, -1.17; $p < 0.002$) than students having poor social support.

Discussion

The current study sought to identify the major stressors that create stress among university students. It also tried to identify the sources of perceived social support and examine the association between perceived social support and stress.

The current study revealed that the top stressors for university students were 'serious illness in family members' (mean = 2.30, Std. Deviation = 1.588), 'misunderstood or rejected by others' (mean = 1.79, Std. Deviation = 1.508), 'major change in financial state' (mean = 1.99, Std. Deviation = 1.321) respectively in family related, psychological, as well as economic and environmental domains. Besides, 'serious illness in family members' (mean = 2.30, Std. Deviation = 1.588) was the top stressor in terms of overall severity ranking. These findings were consistent with several previous studies. Empirical studies revealed that 'major and chronic financial problems' and 'family issues' were the top stressors among students (Aan et al., 2009; Sajem, 2014; Sokratous et al., 2013). On the other hand, the findings of several studies were inconsistent with the current study. These studies found

that environmental factors (Sharma & Kaur, 2011), lack of balance between different aspects of life, making poor decisions in new-found independence, conflict at home, at work, at housemates and so on (Logan & Burns, 2023) were the most primary sources of stress among the study participants. The socio-demographic characteristics such as age, year of the study, and income influenced the sources of stress. Similarly, the study setting is also the most influential factors for the variation of sources. Therefore, the findings of the current study are inconsistent with several previous literatures.

The current study also found that social support from family was more reported than social support from friends and significant others. Abdul Aziz et al., (2023) supported this finding. On the other hand, the finding of another study is inconsistent with the current study. They found that special persons were the main source of perceived social support among the study participants (Kwan et al., 2023). The main reason for this inconsistency is the variation in study area and population.

The current study also revealed that stress and perceived social support were negatively correlated. Ramezankhani et al. (2013), Abdul Aziz et al. (2023), McLean et al. (2023), and Kwan et al. (2023) also discovered negative correlations between perceived stress and perceived social support.

This study has several strengths along with limitations. Findings of the current study have reproduced the assumptions of the theories including the definition of the situation and looking glass self-theories. Despite this strength, convenience sampling was used in the present study and it was conducted only in one university. Therefore, additional research on stress can be conducted on a large scale in Bangladesh including more private and public universities using random sampling.

Conclusion

Firstly, the current study examined the prime stressors among the study participants and found that serious illness in family members was the most prevalent stressor among university students. Besides this, unstable financial condition, changing living environment, political pressure, and adaptation issue were the top stressors among the study participants. Secondly, the present study wanted to examine the association between stress and perceived social support and revealed that the study participants received more social support from family than friends and special persons. The finding of the current study also discovered that perceived social support and stress were negatively correlated, which indicated that if social support increases, the level of stress

will decrease; on the other hand, if social support decreases, the level of stress will increase.

The findings of the current study may improve our knowledge of stress and social support. It discovered the most significant stressors and how social support reduced the impact of stress. As a result, university authorities, guardians, and peer groups can raise awareness about the importance of social support to minimize the level of stress and adapt to new situational threats.

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