JOURNAL FOR SOCIAL SCIENCE STUDIES
An International Peer-Reviewed Open Access Journal

ISSN (Online): 3006-2071 | ISSN (Print): 3006-2063
Volume 4 • Issue 5 • September 2026

EXPLORING ACADEMIC STRESS AND COPING STRATEGIES: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY ON UNIVERSITY RESEARCH STUDENTS IN SOCIAL SCIENCES

Syeda Khazeena Fatima Bukhari[*1], Dr. Muhammad Saeed[2]

[*1]*M.Phil Scholar, School of Education, Minhaj University Lahore*
[2]*Professor, School of Education, Minhaj University Lahore*

[*1]bukharisyeda656@gmail.com, [2]muhammadsaeed.edu@mul.edu.pk

DOI: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.22953173

Keywords
Academic Stress; Coping Strategies; Postgraduate Research Students; MPhil; PhD; Social Sciences; Phenomenological Study; Higher Education.

Article History
Received: 23 June 2026
Accepted: 18 August 2026
Published: 25 September 2026

Copyright @Author
Corresponding Author: *
Syeda Khazeena Fatima Bukhari

Abstract

The academic stress is a major concern among postgraduate research students because of the demands of thesis development, research activities, supervision, deadlines and personal responsibilities. The study aimed at examining the academic stress of MPhil and PhD research students in the social sciences and the coping strategies adopted by them. The study employed qualitative interpretive phenomenological design with an interpretivist philosophical paradigm. Thirty postgraduate research students were selected by purposive sampling from four universities of district Lahore and district Faisalabad (Central Punjab, Pakistan) in three disciplines: Education, Psychology and Sociology. The data were gathered by conducting semi-structured interviews via Zoom/physically and analysed thematically using NVivo. The results showed that academic stress was multidimensional i.e. research workload, methodological problems, deadlines, research delays, supervisory factors, financial problems, and institutional problems. Psychological and emotional factors reported by participants included anxiety, demotivation, frustration, emotional exhaustion, overthinking, and sleep disturbance. Students employed self-directed learning, time management, social and supervisory support, spiritual practices, and work-life balance strategies to manage stress. The results underscore the need for supportive supervision, practical research training, counselling, financial support and easy access to research resources to enhance postgraduate research experiences.

INTRODUCTION

Stress is a significant issue in higher education because the academic demands placed on students can be greater than their perceived ability to manage them, leading to emotional, psychological and physical difficulties. Students at university can be stressed by workload, research commitments, exams, time pressure and personal commitments. Academic stress can impact students' motivation, academic achievement, and well-being (Shakeel et al., 2022; Zakaria et al., 2021). It can also lead to anxiety, burnout, emotional exhaustion, and

JOURNAL FOR SOCIAL SCIENCE STUDIES
An International Peer-Reviewed Open Access Journal
ISSN (Online): 3006-2071 | ISSN (Print): 3006-2063
Volume 4 • Issue 5 • September 2026

concentration and time management problems (Islam, 2023). Academic stress is defined as the body's reaction to academic demands and pressures that are greater than an individual's adaptive capacity by Gmelch (1982). Lazarus and Folkman (1984) used the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping to further describe the role of appraisal and coping resources in the stress process, in addition to external demands. So, students can have varying degrees of stress when facing the same academic challenges.

Academic stress is more complicated at the postgraduate level, especially for those doing independent research. MPhil and PhD students must take responsibility for thesis development, literature review, research design, data collection, analysis, academic writing, publication requirements and deadlines. Furthermore, academic pressure can be caused by supervisory expectations, delayed feedback, research uncertainty and institutional procedures. Stress can also be a problem for postgraduate research students due to financial issues, work, family commitments and future career concerns. Liu et al. (2024) concluded that positive supervisor-student relationships were linked to reduced stress, and that resilience and confidence were linked to students' research-related stress management. Similarly, Mercer and Thomas (2024) found that postgraduate researchers experienced high levels of academic stress, and they found adaptive and maladaptive coping strategies. Zile et al. (2023) emphasized the need for supervision and research culture, as poor supervision, isolation, and overwork can have a negative impact on the well-being of postgraduate students. Tariq et al. (2023) also found moderate to high stress levels among postgraduate students and found that students used active coping, acceptance, planning, and religious coping as strategies to cope with stress.

Academic stress can have an impact on academic performance, but also on psychological, emotional, physical and social health. Academic stress has been linked to anxiety, depression, insomnia, burnout, emotional exhaustion, decreased motivation, and academic problems (Awan, 2024; Benítez-Agudelo et al., 2025; Islam, 2023). These effects can be exacerbated in postgraduate research students due to the extended and uncertain process of research. There can be ongoing pressure due to thesis writing, methodological difficulties, data collection, publication requirements, and slow research progress. Meanwhile, other students can gain confidence, resilience, independence, and personal growth in the face of research challenges. Academic stress, therefore, is a multidimensional and dynamic phenomenon that is influenced by academic demands and students' personal and institutional contexts.

Coping is the cognitive and behavioral strategies people employ to deal with demands that are felt as stressful (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The Transactional Model of Stress and Coping identifies two types of coping: problem-focused and emotion-focused. Problem-focused coping includes efforts to solve the problem that is causing the stress, such as planning, problem solving, information seeking, and time management. Emotion-focused coping refers to coping with emotions by using strategies like acceptance, emotional support, relaxation, and related coping strategies. People can adopt one or both coping strategies, depending on the type of stressor and their sense of control.

Some previous research shows that students employ a variety of coping mechanisms to deal with academic stress. These encompass self-directed learning, time management, social support, emotional support, religious practices, recreational activities, and positive thinking (Bukhari & Ejaz, 2020; Saleem & Zia, 2024; Zahid et al., 2025; Zakaria et al., 2021). Resilience has also been linked to lower academic stress and coping (Bukhari et al., 2024). Qualitative research has revealed that time management, planning, prioritization, study breaks, healthy routines, and seeking support are strategies for managing academic pressures (Islam & Rabbi, 2024). Positive thinking interventions have also been found to alleviate stress related to the thesis and

ISSN (Online): 3006-2071 | ISSN (Print): 3006-2063
Volume 4 • Issue 5 • September 2026

enhance problem-focused coping among postgraduate students in the Pakistani context (Soomra et al., 2024). The results indicate that there is a close relationship between coping and students' perception of stress and resources.

Academic stress is a major issue in higher education in Pakistan. Workload, examinations, time constraints, financial difficulties, institutional challenges, and uncertainty regarding future employment may contribute to students' stress. Saeed et al. (2020) found that time management, examinations, coursework, financial pressure, and teacher-student relationships were important sources of student stress, whereas Shakeel et al. (2022) reported that test fear, lack of preparation, and parental expectations were common stressors. Ahmad and Rana (2021) revealed that there was a negative correlation between perceived stress and academic performance among 362 MPhil Education students of Pakistani state universities and emphasized the need for institutional support and mental health activities. Other studies have also found that heavy academic workload, financial problems, lack of institutional support, research requirements, and future employment concerns are significant challenges for university students (Asif & Khoso, 2025; Javaid et al., 2024). For postgraduate students, research demands, family responsibilities, commuting, academic workload, and peer support and institutional support can also be a source of stress, while time management and personal motivation can be a source of coping (Jamil et al., 2026).

The higher education system in Pakistan can thus influence the nature of academic stress and how students react to it. Students may face academic difficulties, but supportive institutional environments, social support, positive thinking, and resilience can help them cope with these challenges (Asif & Khoso, 2025; Naz & Qureshi, 2024; Soomra et al., 2024). However, the majority of the previous studies have been conducted on undergraduate, medical, nursing, and other health-related students, and the research methods used have been quantitative or survey-based (Buriro et al., 2024; Gondal et al., 2025; Meena et al., 2024). Although quantitative studies offer important data on the levels and relationships of stress and coping, they may not adequately reflect students' personal experiences and the significance they give to their research process. Qualitative research can help to gain a deeper understanding of these lived experiences (Shahzadi et al., 2024; Waterhouse & Samra, 2025).

In Pakistan, little attention has been paid to the postgraduate research students in the social sciences. The challenges of writing a thesis, designing a research, collecting data, publishing requirements, supervisory dynamics, research delays and uncertainty during the research process are unique for MPhil and PhD research students. Furthermore, there is a lack of qualitative studies that examine the role of institutional factors, supervisory support, academic expectations, and research conditions in influencing the stress experiences and coping mechanisms of these students (Ahmad & Rana, 2021; Aziz et al., 2025; Saleem et al., 2023). This gap is significant because the experience of academic stress can differ based on students' research phase, academic field, institutional context, personal obligations, and support networks. A qualitative exploration can thus offer a more contextualized understanding of the experience and response of postgraduate research students to academic stress.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

The present study is based on the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). The model is a dynamic one, in which stress is seen as a product of the interaction between individuals and their environment. The model suggests that stress can occur when people feel that their demands are greater than their resources. Cognitive appraisal is central as people assess the importance of a stressor and their capacity to deal with it. The model also differentiates between problem-focused coping (which involves dealing with or managing the source of stress) and emotion-focused coping

ISSN (Online): 3006-2071 | ISSN (Print): 3006-2063
Volume 4 • Issue 5 • September 2026

(which involves regulating emotional reactions to stressful situations).

The model in the present study is used to understand the academic and research demands of MPhil and PhD research students and their reactions to these demands in terms of coping strategies. Thesis workload, deadlines, publication pressure, supervisory expectations, methodological challenges, and other research demands are examples of research-related stressors. Students' perception of these demands and their resources can affect their perception of academic stress and choice of coping strategies. These strategies can involve time management, planning, self-directed learning, seeking academic support, social and emotional support, religious practices, relaxation, and other responses. Academic stress and coping is thus a dynamic and continuous process in the research environment, and the framework takes this into account.

While academic stress and coping has been studied extensively, the literature suggests that there is a need for more qualitative research on the lived experience of postgraduate research students in the social sciences in Pakistan. Hence, the present study is focused on MPhil and PhD research students in the field of Education, Psychology and Sociology and the aim of the study is to find out their experience of academic stress and coping strategies they use to manage the challenges of research in the field of Education, Psychology and Sociology. The results could offer valuable information for research students, supervisors, and higher education institutions to create supportive academic and research environments.

JOURNAL FOR SOCIAL SCIENCE STUDIES
ADVANCING KNOWLEDGE, INSPIRING SOCIETY

JOURNAL FOR SOCIAL SCIENCE STUDIES
An International Peer-Reviewed Open Access Journal

ISSN (Online): 3006-2071 | ISSN (Print): 3006-2063
Volume 4 • Issue 5 • September 2026

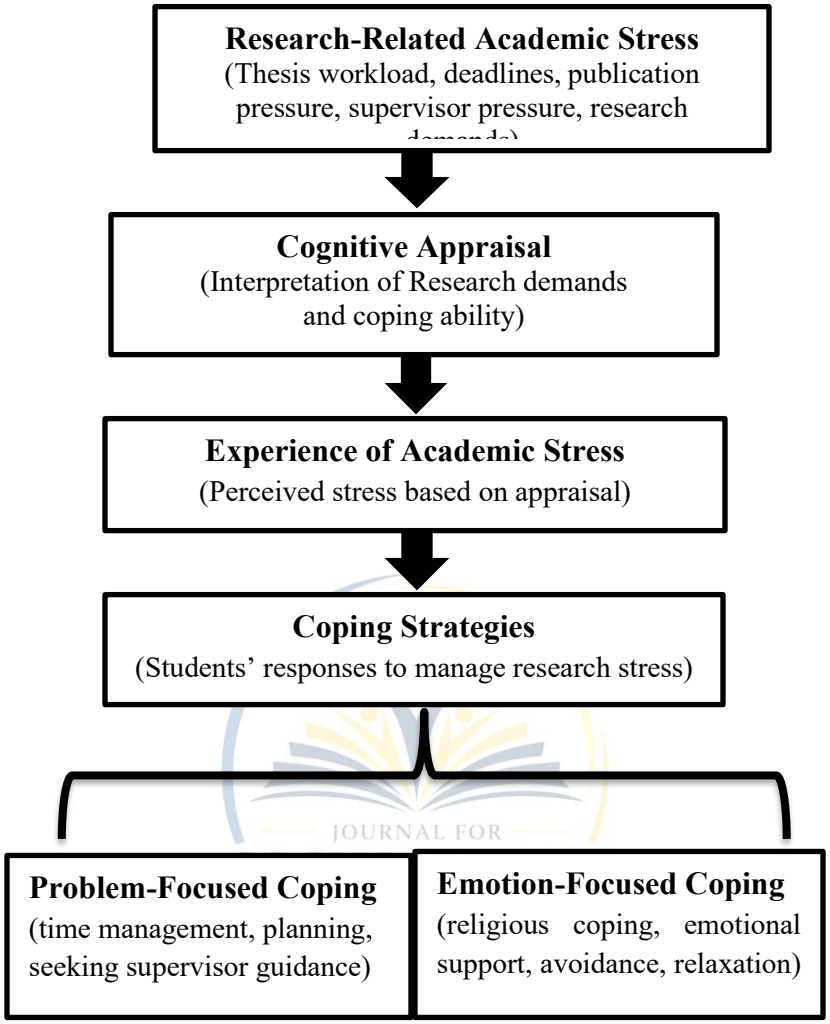

Figure 1. Conceptual framework of academic stress and coping strategies among research students

Objectives

1. To explore the types and sources of academic stress experienced by MPhil and PhD research students in social sciences.
2. To identify coping strategies used by the research students to overcome academic stress.

Research Questions

1. What are the causes of stress and what type of stress do MPhil and PhD students face in social sciences?
2. What are the coping strategies are used by the research students to overcome academic stress?

Research Methodology

The study was based on the interpretivist paradigm that focuses on the subjective meaning and lived experiences of individuals in their social and contextual contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This paradigm was suitable as it was the intention of the study to investigate the experience and interpretation of academic stress and coping strategies among MPhil and PhD research students in the research process. A qualitative research design using an interpretive phenomenological approach was used to understand participants' lived experiences in-

JOURNAL FOR SOCIAL SCIENCE STUDIES
An International Peer-Reviewed Open Access Journal
ISSN (Online): 3006-2071 | ISSN (Print): 3006-2063
Volume 4 • Issue 5 • September 2026

depth. The method allowed the researcher to investigate the students' perception of academic stress in their academic, personal, social and institutional environment. The concept of intentionality in relation to phenomenological inquiry was also used to inform the study, as it is an inquiry that emphasizes the direction of a person's consciousness toward and the giving of meaning to specific experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Population, Participants and Sampling

The study involved 336 post-graduate research students (MPhil and PhD) of social sciences from four selected public and private universities of Lahore and Faisalabad. The universities that participated were: University of the Punjab Lahore, Government College University Faisalabad, Minhaj University Lahore and Riphah International University Faisalabad Campus. The subjects of the participants were from the field of Education, Psychology and Sociology. A total of 30 postgraduate research students participated in the study. The participants were selected using purposive sampling as they were actively involved in research at the post-graduate level and had first-hand experience of academic stress. Data collection was continued until depth and saturation of themes were reached. Thus, the sample was selected based on the principle of data saturation, not on statistical representativeness (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Palinkas et al., 2015).

Research Instrument and Data Collection

Data were gathered using a semi-structured interview protocol that was developed based on the literature review, the study objectives and the conceptual framework. The open-ended questions focused on participants' experiences and sources of academic stress, coping strategies, supervisory and institutional support, and suggestions for improving postgraduate research students' well-being. The content validity of the interview protocol was determined by three experts from the fields of Psychology, Sociology and Education. The experts evaluated the clarity, relevance, sequence, language, phenomenological appropriateness, and the relationship of the questions to the research goals. The protocol was then reviewed and approved by the research supervisor. Two mock interviews, one with an MPhil student and one with a PhD student, not included in the final sample, were also conducted to evaluate the clarity, flow, sequence and estimated duration of the interviews. Some minor changes were made in response to the feedback.

Once the necessary permissions were obtained, potential participants were reached by WhatsApp and other professional communication methods. Participants were told about the study, the voluntary nature of participation, confidentiality, anonymity, and the right to withdraw at any time. Informed consent was obtained verbally, with consent for audio recording before each interview. All 30 semi-structured interviews were conducted via Zoom, as per the convenience and availability of the participants. The interviews were conducted for about 30-45 minutes. Probing questions were used where necessary to obtain detailed accounts of participants' lived experiences. The interviews were audio-recorded with permission and transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were reviewed for accuracy with the recordings.

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the interview data, following the six steps outlined by Creswell (2009): Reviewing, Organizing, Coding, drawing themes, describing themes, and drawing conclusions. The transcripts were read multiple times to familiarise oneself with the data and were organised and coded in NVivo qualitative data analysis software. Codes were clustered into themes and sub-themes of participants' experiences of academic stress and coping strategies. Themes were illustrated with verbatim quotations that were relevant to the themes, and the interpretation of the findings was connected to the research questions, conceptual framework, and literature.

JOURNAL FOR SOCIAL SCIENCE STUDIES
An International Peer-Reviewed Open Access Journal

ISSN (Online): 3006-2071 | ISSN (Print): 3006-2063
Volume 4 • Issue 5 • September 2026

Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles were adhered to during the research process. Prior to data collection, approval was sought from the research supervisor and appropriate university authorities. Participants were told about the purpose of the study, voluntary participation, that they could withdraw at any time without penalty, and that the data would be used for academic purposes. Verbal informed consent and consent for audio recording was obtained. The names and identifying information of the participants were not included in the study and codes or pseudonyms were used to ensure anonymity. Interviews were recorded, transcribed and related research documents were kept securely and only accessed by the researcher.

Data Analysis and Findings

Participant Profile

A total of 30 postgraduate research students participated in the study. There were 9 males and 21 females in the sample. The participants included students from four selected public and private universities of Lahore and Faisalabad from the field of Education, Psychology and Sociology.

Table 1 Demographic Characteristics of the Participants (N = 30)

Characteristic	Category	n
Gender	Male	9
	Female	21
Degree	MPhil	16
	PhD	14
Discipline	Education	9
	Psychology	10
	Sociology	11
University	Public	2
	Private	2

Academic Stress Experiences

The first major theme, Academic Stress Experiences, reflected the ways postgraduate research students experienced stress during different stages of their research journey. Stress factors reported by the participants were related to academic responsibilities, assignments and deadlines, proposal writing, methodological challenges, research delays, workload, and thesis writing. Stress levels were different depending on the stage of research, methodological needs, professional duties, level of preparation and personal factors.

Table 2 Academic Stress Experiences among Postgraduate Research Students

Theme	Sub-themes	Participants
Academic Stress Experiences	Academic Responsibility	P06, P08, P16
	Assignment Pressure	P08
	Deadline Pressure	P08, P14, P28
	Mixed Methods Complexity	P08
	Proposal Writing Stress	P09, P12, P14, P18, P24, P25, P28, P30

JOURNAL FOR SOCIAL SCIENCE STUDIES
An International Peer-Reviewed Open Access Journal

ISSN (Online): 3006-2071 | ISSN (Print): 3006-2063
Volume 4 • Issue 5 • September 2026

Theme	Sub-themes	Participants
	Qualitative Research Challenge	P13, P25, P28
	Research Delay	P01, P06, P21, P24
	Research Workload	P08, P14, P24, P28
	Thesis Writing Stress	P09, P16, P18

P =Participants (Postgraduate Research Students from Social Sciences)

The participants employed self-directed learning and structured routines to deal with research challenges. P28 learned SPSS and NVivo from "self-study, reading multiple articles, consulting with seniors, and reviewing others' theses" and P01 learned SPSS and NVivo from YouTube and senior students. Family, peers, experts, and supervisors also provided social support to help participants cope with academic and emotional issues. P15 said, "Family support is a must I can't deny that," and one participant said, "I think I would not have been able to do my MPhil without their guidance." Spiritual practices also helped with emotional support, with one participant stating, "I pray (Namaz) immediately, when I get up from the prayer mat I feel completely relaxed and go back to work." In general, coping was dynamic, with participants using a mixture of coping strategies as needed.

Sources of Academic Stress

The second major theme, Sources of Academic Stress, was directed specifically at the sources of stress that were created or exacerbated in postgraduate research students. Two general types of stress were identified: research stress and supervisor stress.

Table 3 Sources of Academic Stress among Postgraduate Research Students

Theme	Sub-themes	Participants
Research-related Stress	Data collection challenges	P12, P17, P18, P24
	Participant non-cooperation	P09, P17
	Participant understanding/responses	P18
	Participant bias	P15
	Financial burden	P01, P24
	Institutional issues	P21, P24
	Literature review challenges	P12
	Software difficulties	P01
	Statistical analysis	P01
	Time management	P06, P09
Supervisor-related Stress	Delayed meetings	P06, P10, P23
	Lack of feedback	P12, P23
	Supervisor communication	P09, P23
	Supervisor expectations	P10, P12

P =Participants (Postgraduate Research Students from Social Sciences)

JOURNAL FOR SOCIAL SCIENCE STUDIES
An International Peer-Reviewed Open Access Journal

ISSN (Online): 3006-2071 | ISSN (Print): 3006-2063
Volume 4 • Issue 5 • September 2026

The academic stress reported by the participants was due to research-related, technical, financial, institutional and supervisory issues. Research challenges were data collection, participant cooperation, access to research settings, literature searching, research software, statistical analysis, and time management. The research burden also grew due to financial issues associated with travelling, printing, formatting, and other research costs. Participants also reported that they lacked practical experience in SPSS and NVivo, which was a source of uncertainty and added to their workload. Other factors that contributed to stress were supervisory factors, such as delayed meetings, lack of or delayed feedback, communication problems, and supervisory expectations. P23 reported that delays in supervisory processes had an impact on research progress, and participants highlighted the importance of clear and timely guidance. But not all supervisory experiences were negative, with some participants reporting that their supervisors were cooperative and supportive. The overall results show that academic stress was a result of the interaction of research-related, technical, financial, institutional and supervisory factors, and that the level of stress experienced depended on the stage of research, preparation, institutional context and individual circumstances of the students.

Academic and Social Impact

The third major theme was Academic and Social Impact, which referred to the impact of academic stress on participants' academic engagement, motivation, determination, personal growth and social interaction. Some participants reported decreased motivation, engagement in schoolwork, and social isolation, while others reported that stressful research experiences led to greater determination, learning, confidence, and personal growth. The differences suggest that the impact of academic stress was different for the participants based on their research experiences, coping skills, research stage, and personal factors.

Table 4 Impact of Academic Stress on Academic and Social Life among Postgraduate Research Students

Theme	Sub-themes	Participants
Impact on Academic and Social Life	Academic Engagement	P06, P10, P13, P18, P20, P23, P29
	Increased Determination	P01, P05, P08, P12, P15, P18, P30
	Positive Growth	P03, P05, P08, P13, P15, P23
	Reduced Motivation	P06, P08, P12, P18, P20, P23, P28
	Reduced Social Interaction	P01, P08, P13, P15, P18, P27, P29
	Social Isolation	P01, P06, P13, P18, P27, P29

P = Participants (Postgraduate Research Students from Social Sciences)

The academic stress had a differential impact on the motivation, academic engagement and social interaction of the participants. Extended delays, repeated corrections and research uncertainty were reported by some participants as a source of reduced motivation and engagement. P06 reported that lower motivation was related to lower academic engagement, and P23 reported that extended delays in supervision might result in loss of interest in research. Some participants, however, were motivated to be determined, confident, independent and growing in their research challenges. P13 said, "Positive attitude and consistent effort, little by little." Academic

JOURNAL FOR SOCIAL SCIENCE STUDIES
An International Peer-Reviewed Open Access Journal

ISSN (Online): 3006-2071 | ISSN (Print): 3006-2063
Volume 4 • Issue 5 • September 2026

stress also impacted participants' social and personal lives, with some reporting a decrease in family, friends, classmates, and social network interactions. P01 talked about being less involved in family affairs during an intensive research period and P27 mentioned that during research and clinical placement, there was a significant reduction in social and personal interaction. Academic stress had a negative and positive impact overall, with decreased motivation and social interaction, and increased determination, learning, independence, and personal growth.

Psychological and Emotional Impact

The fourth major theme, Psychological and Emotional Impact, reflected the emotional and psychological effects of academic stress experienced by participants. These were: anxiety, demotivation, emotional exhaustion, fear, frustration, loss of confidence, overthinking and sleep disturbance. Some of the participants also reported gaining in resilience and maturity as a result of their research experiences.

Table 5 Psychological and Emotional Impact of Academic Stress among Postgraduate Research Students

Theme	Sub-themes	Participants
Psychological and Emotional Impact	Anxiety	P02, P09, P14, P28
	Demotivation	P09, P12, P14, P28
	Emotional Exhaustion	P27, P28
	Fear	P02, P08, P20, P28
	Frustration	P09, P24, P28
	Loss of Confidence	P09, P14, P18
	Overthinking	P12, P18, P28
	Sleep Disturbance	P02, P14, P24, P28
	Age-related Resilience	P14

P = Participants (Postgraduate Research Students from Social Sciences)

Participants mentioned psychological and emotional outcomes of academic stress such as anxiety, fear, loss of motivation, loss of confidence, emotional exhaustion, frustration, overthinking and sleep disturbance. P02 had anxiety and sleep problems when the proposal was being made, and P28 had anxiety after an unexpected topic change. Frequent corrections and research challenges decreased motivation and confidence, and extended demands and delays led to frustration and emotional fatigue. Some participants, however, also gained resilience and maturity as a result of their research experiences. In general, academic stress had multidimensional psychological and emotional impacts depending on the nature of the research, stage and individual.

Coping Strategies

Coping Strategies emerged as a major theme related to Research Objective 2. Participants employed a mix of self, social and spiritual coping strategies to cope with academic stress. Self-coping strategies were self-learning, Internet resources, time management, structured routines, breaks, and recreational activities. Social coping included family, peers, senior researchers, experts and supervisors, and spiritual coping included prayer, supplication, Qur'anic recitation, religious faith, and Tawakkul.

JOURNAL FOR SOCIAL SCIENCE STUDIES
An International Peer-Reviewed Open Access Journal

ISSN (Online): 3006-2071 | ISSN (Print): 3006-2063
Volume 4 • Issue 5 • September 2026

Table 6 Coping Strategies Used by Postgraduate Research Students

Theme	Sub-themes	Participants
Coping Strategies	Self-Coping	P01, P02, P09, P12, P14, P18, P27, P28, P30
	Social Coping	P06, P08, P10, P12, P15, P18, P20, P21, P23, P25, P27, P28, P29, P30
	Spiritual Coping	P02, P08, P12, P14, P18, P20, P23, P28, P30

P = Participants (Postgraduate Research Students from Social Sciences)

Participants employed self-directed learning and structured routines in dealing with research problems. P28 learned SPSS and NVivo through "self-study, reading multiple articles, consulting with seniors, and reviewing others' theses" and P01 learned SPSS and NVivo from YouTube and senior students. Family, peers, experts, and supervisors also provided social support that helped participants cope with academic and emotional issues. P15 said, "Family support is a must I can't deny that," and one participant noted the need for supervisory guidance, "I think I would not have been able to do my MPhil without their guidance." Spiritual practices also helped to provide emotional support; one participant said, "I pray (Namaz) immediately, when I get up from the prayer mat I feel relaxed and go back to work." In general, coping was flexible, and participants used a variety of coping strategies depending on the situation.

Work-Life Balance

Work-Life Balance captured participants' experiences of balancing research with work, family, professional and personal responsibilities. Academic prioritization, planning, scheduling and time management were used by participants, with some reporting that they had to give up on personal, family, and social activities.

Table 7 Work-Life Balance among Postgraduate Research Students

Theme	Sub-themes	Participants
Work-Life Balance	Academic Priority	P05, P12, P25, P29
	Family Responsibilities	P02, P09, P12, P14, P18, P24, P27, P29
	Job Responsibilities	P06, P08, P09, P14, P20, P27, P29
	Personal Life Management	P05, P09, P12, P18, P24, P27, P30
	Planning and Scheduling	P06, P09, P14, P18, P20, P30
	Time Balance	P01, P06, P08, P14, P18, P20, P24, P27, P29

P = Participants (Postgraduate Research Students from Social Sciences)

Research was cited as a conflict with family and professional responsibilities. P18 mentioned that her family and social life had suffered due to the demands of the PhD, and P27 said that her personal life was "completely side-lined" during her intensive research and clinical training. Some participants used planning and scheduling to deal with competing demands. P18 said that they have specific "deep work" times for research, and another participant said, "Time management is

JOURNAL FOR SOCIAL SCIENCE STUDIES
An International Peer-Reviewed Open Access Journal

ISSN (Online): 3006-2071 | ISSN (Print): 3006-2063
Volume 4 • Issue 5 • September 2026

the key to getting work done." In general, work-life balance was an ongoing process that was affected by academic workload, employment, family responsibilities, and the stage of research.

University Support and Recommendations

Participants recognized that institutional support is crucial for dealing with academic stress and for successful completion of research. The key areas covered were practical research training, supervision, counselling, financial support, access to journals, research resources, software training, workshops, scholarships and AI guidance.

Table 8 University Support and Recommendations for Reducing Academic Stress among Postgraduate Research Students

Theme	Sub-themes	Participants
University Support & Recommendations	AI Training	P14, P18, P25
	Better Supervision	P06, P10, P12, P23, P29
	Counselling Services	P01, P12, P15, P16, P17
	Financial Support	P01, P05, P24, P29, P30
	Journal Access	P05, P12, P24
	Mental Health Counselling	P01, P15, P16, P17
	NVivo Training	P01, P06, P15
	Practical Research Training	P01, P15, P17, P23, P30
	Research Resources	P01, P05, P12, P24, P30
	Research Workshops	P15, P17, P23, P30
	Scholarships	P01, P16, P30
	Software Access	P01, P17, P30
	SPSS Training	P01, P06, P15, P30

P = Participants (Postgraduate Research Students from Social Sciences)

The participants highlighted the need to provide practical training in SPSS, NVivo, qualitative analysis, and academic writing along with theoretical research methodology. Participants also emphasized the importance of supportive supervision, counselling and mentoring, and P23 emphasized the need for "step-by-step" guidance. Other needs identified were financial assistance, access to journals, research resources, and authentic software. There was also a recommendation to use AI training to tackle issues of academic integrity and responsible use. Overall, the participants highlighted that the provision of responsive supervision, hands-on training, psychological support, and sufficient institutional resources could contribute to minimizing unnecessary academic stress and support the completion of research.

Discussion

The results of the study are discussed in terms of the research objectives, previous literature and the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The first research objective was to investigate the nature and sources of academic stress faced by postgraduate research students in the course of their research. The results indicated that academic stress was a

JOURNAL FOR SOCIAL SCIENCE STUDIES
An International Peer-Reviewed Open Access Journal
ISSN (Online): 3006-2071 | ISSN (Print): 3006-2063
Volume 4 • Issue 5 • September 2026

multidimensional and dynamic phenomenon that took place at various stages of the research process. The participants were stressed out in the process of writing the proposal, selecting the topic, conducting literature review, making decisions on methodology, data collection, writing the thesis, meeting deadlines, and facing delays in research. The development of proposals was especially difficult due to the uncertainty of the students in selecting topics, conducting research, and the expectations of the academic world. The results align with Anjala (2024), Domaley et al. (2023), Misra and McKean (2000), and Tariq et al. (2023), who found that workload, time pressure, research requirements, and early research difficulties are significant factors of academic stress.

The results also indicated that research-related problems were one of the major factors that caused academic stress. The problems reported by the participants were: data collection, participant cooperation, literature search, statistical analysis and research software (SPSS and NVivo). Lack of practical experience with these tools made research tasks more time consuming and labor intensive. This implies that theoretical knowledge of research methodology is not always enough when students are asked to do research on their own.

Other sources of stress identified were supervisory and institutional factors. The participants mentioned delayed feedback, lack of supervision, communication problems, unclear expectations, and delays in institutional procedures. The results are in line with the studies of Ahmad and Rana (2021), Liu et al. (2024), Misra and McKean (2000), Saeed et al. (2020), and Zile et al. (2023), which identified workload, supervisory relationships, financial concerns, and institutional support as key factors in students' academic experiences.

Academic stress was also attributed to financial problems. Some students had to face the extra burden of travelling costs, printing, formatting, software and other research activities. These financial issues may add to the pressure of the research process when added to the academic workload and other responsibilities. The results, therefore, suggest that academic stress was not only related to academic demands but also to the practical conditions of students' research activities.

The results indicated that academic stress had an impact on the participants' motivation and academic involvement. Some participants indicated that they felt less motivated due to frequent corrections, extended waiting times and doubts about their research process. But other participants became more determined, independent, confident and grew as persons in the face of research challenges. The results are in line with the studies conducted by Abid et al. (2021), Anjala (2024), Benítez-Agudelo et al. (2025), Islam (2023), and Misra and McKean (2000) which found that academic stress has an impact on motivation, well-being, and social functioning.

Academic stress also had an impact on the social and personal lives of the participants. Some participants said they had less contact with family, friends, classmates, and social networks due to research requirements. Sometimes, family and social activities were limited because of the need to do research assignments. This means that postgraduate research can have an impact on other aspects of life, not just academic, especially if students have several responsibilities.

Psychological and emotional effects were also reported by participants, such as anxiety, fear, frustration, emotional exhaustion, overthinking, sleep disturbance, demotivation, and decreased confidence. These findings are consistent with Abid et al. (2021), Anjala (2024), Awan (2024), Benítez-Agudelo et al. (2025), and Jamali et al. (2024). Some of the participants, however, also reported that research experiences were challenging but also developmental, in terms of increased resilience and confidence.

The Transactional Model of Stress and Coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) helps explain these differences in participants' experiences. The results indicate that students did not react to the research needs in the same manner. Their experiences were different depending on their stage of research, preparation, personal

JOURNAL FOR SOCIAL SCIENCE STUDIES
An International Peer-Reviewed Open Access Journal
ISSN (Online): 3006-2071 | ISSN (Print): 3006-2063
Volume 4 • Issue 5 • September 2026

responsibilities, support available, and their sense of being able to handle difficulties. Therefore, the level of stress seemed to be dependent not only on the demands themselves, but on students' appraisal of the demands and their coping resources.

The second research goal was to find out the coping strategies adopted by postgraduate research students in coping with academic stress. Participants employed a variety of strategies such as self-directed learning, time management, academic guidance, social support, supervisory support, and spiritual practices. The results are similar to those of Lazarus and Folkman (1984), Saleem and Zia (2024), Shahzadi et al. (2024), Zahid et al. (2025), and Zakaria et al. (2021) who highlighted the importance of using various coping strategies to deal with academic stress.

Problem-focused coping strategies included self-directed learning and academic guidance. The participants learned about research procedures and software through research articles, YouTube, previous theses, senior students, and other sources. Likewise, participants were able to overcome methodological and academic challenges by consulting with supervisors, experts, and experienced students. These strategies enabled students to directly respond to research problems and continue their research activities.

Social and spiritual support was also important in coping. Family members, peers, supervisors, and others provided academic and emotional support for participants. Prayer, patience, and positive attitudes were also used to manage stressful situations. The results of this study suggest that participants used problem-focused and emotion-focused coping strategies in a manner that was appropriate for them and the type of problem they were dealing with.

Another important coping factor was managing research tasks while working, having family and household responsibilities, and having personal responsibilities. Participants planned, scheduled, prioritized and dedicated research time to handle competing demands. The results corroborate those of Anjala (2024) and Misra and McKean (2000) who found that workload and competing responsibilities are factors that cause academic stress. Time management and organization seemed to be effective in keeping participants on track with their research and other duties.

Finally, the participants highlighted the need for supportive supervision, practical research training, counselling, financial support, access to software and journal resources, and research workshops. They especially emphasized the importance of hands-on experience with SPSS, NVivo, qualitative analysis, and academic writing. These findings are consistent with Asif and Khoso (2025), Jamil et al. (2026), Javaid et al. (2024), Rehman and Sajjad (2024), and Soomra et al. (2024). In general, the results show that postgraduate research students dealt with academic stress by using personal, social, spiritual and organizational resources and that their research experiences helped them to learn, become independent, resilient and develop themselves.

Conclusion

The present study investigated the academic stress of postgraduate research students in social sciences and coping strategies adopted to deal with the academic stress in the course of research. The results suggest that academic stress was not a simple one-dimensional and one-stage phenomenon but a multi-dimensional, multi-staged and dynamic phenomenon, not related to any specific research activity. The participants were stressed at various phases of the research process such as in the development of the research proposal, selection of topic, literature review, methodological decisions, data collection, data analysis, thesis writing, deadlines, and delays in research. The experiences indicate that postgraduate research has a variety of academic challenges which can cause stress for students during their research process.

The study revealed that research workload was one of the sources of academic stress. The participants expressed problems with managing various research tasks within the limited time and

JOURNAL FOR SOCIAL SCIENCE STUDIES
An International Peer-Reviewed Open Access Journal
ISSN (Online): 3006-2071 | ISSN (Print): 3006-2063
Volume 4 • Issue 5 • September 2026

resources. Stress was also caused by methodological challenges, including research design, data analysis, SPSS, NVivo and qualitative research procedures. Some participants found the burden to be increased due to limited practical experience and the need to learn research skills on their own. The results of this study show that it is important to prepare postgraduate students in practical research besides theoretical knowledge.

Supervision and institutional factors also played a role in influencing students' research experiences. Participants noted that factors that might exacerbate academic stress were delayed feedback, limited supervisory availability, communication issues, unclear expectations, and institutional procedures. Meanwhile, supportive supervisors were seen as a significant source of academic guidance and assistance. This means that good supervision can be a significant factor in assisting students to understand the need for research, to overcome problems and to keep on track during the research process.

Participants reported additional academic stress due to financial and personal obligations. Some students faced extra pressure due to the costs of research, such as traveling, printing, formatting, software and other needs. Participants also had to balance research with work, family, household, and personal obligations. Thus, academic stress was not a standalone phenomenon, but rather was a part of students' broader contexts. Rather, research was interwoven with financial, professional, family, and personal obligations.

The results also showed that academic stress had an impact on students' lives in various aspects. Academically, some participants reported decreased motivation, engagement, and confidence as a result of frequent corrections, delays, and research challenges. Socially, some participants reported that their research duties affected their interactions with family, friends and social networks. Psychologically and emotionally, participants reported anxiety, fear, frustration, emotional exhaustion, overthinking, sleep disturbance, demotivation, and decreased confidence. The results of this study show the broader implications of the academic stress experienced by postgraduate research students.

The results also indicated that the research process was not all bad. After encountering and overcoming research challenges, some participants said they had become more confident, independent, determined, resilient and had grown as a person. The solving of methodological problems, seeking guidance, self-study and the completion of complex research tasks seemed to have a positive impact on students' academic and personal growth. Therefore, the research process was a challenging one, but also a learning and growing experience.

In relation to the second research objective, the study revealed that participants employed different coping mechanisms to cope with academic stress. One of the strategies that students used to deal with methodological and technical problems was self-directed learning. Participants gained knowledge and research skills through research articles, online resources, previous theses, senior students and other sources. Other activities such as time management, planning, scheduling and prioritization were also employed to manage research activities in addition to other activities.

Another significant source of coping was social and supervisory support. Participants sought assistance from family members, peers, senior students, experts, and supervisors when they encountered academic or personal difficulties. Some participants also used spiritual practices such as prayer, patience and positive attitudes to cope with emotional pressure. The results of this study suggest that students tended to employ both problem-focused and emotion-focused coping strategies, rather than relying on one type of coping.

The results are consistent with the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping of Lazarus and Folkman (1984). The model provides an explanation for the differential response of participants to similar research demands. Students' experiences seemed to differ based on their evaluation of research challenges and coping resources. Supervisors, family, peers, and

ISSN (Online): 3006-2071 | ISSN (Print): 3006-2063
Volume 4 • Issue 5 • September 2026

institutions were found to be sources of support that enabled participants to cope with academic demands, along with personal strategies of self-learning and time management.

The study overall suggests that academic stress of post graduate research students in social sciences is related to the interaction of academic, methodological, supervisory, institutional, financial and personal factors. Individual coping and supportive school environments are needed. The results indicate that the reduction of unnecessary stress should not be limited to the students' coping ability, but also universities and supervisors should play an important role in providing practical training, timely guidance, psychological support, financial support, and suitable research resources.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are made based on the findings:

1. **Practical Research Training:**
   Regular training in research methodology, SPSS, NVivo, qualitative analysis and academic writing should be offered at universities.
2. **Supportive Supervision:**
   Supervisors should give timely and constructive feedback, communicate regularly, and set expectations and deadlines for research.
3. **Counselling and Mentoring:**
   There should be counselling, academic support and mentoring services available to postgraduate research students at universities that are accessible to them.
4. **Research and Financial Resources:**
   Institutions should enhance access to journals, databases, research software, digital resources, scholarships, grants and other research facilities.
5. **Time Management and Research Environment:**
   Universities should offer advice on stress management, time management and work–life balance and foster a supportive and conducive research environment.

REFERENCES

Abid, A., Farhan, S., & Atif, T. (2021). Academic stress, psychological distress, coping and self-efficacy among undergraduate university students during COVID-19. *Asian Journal of Social Sciences and Management Studies, 8*(2), 43–52. https://doi.org/10.20448/journal.500.2021.82.43.52

Ahmad, S., & Rana, S. (2021). Effect of perceived stress and self-esteem on the academic performance of postgraduate students in Pakistan. *Psychology and Education, 58*(5), 1965-1976. https://www.psychologyandeducation.net/pae/index.php/pae/article/view/3253

Anjala, K. (2024). Understanding the academic stress: Factors, impact and strategies: A review. *International Journal of Advanced Research and Innovation (IJARI), 12*(1), 11–16. https://doi.org/10.69996/ijari.2024003

Asif, M., & Khoso, A. R. (2025). Educating under pressure: A sociological analysis of academic stress and mental well-being among graduate students in Sindh. *Symbiohealth, 4*(1), 1–12. https://doi.org/10.59525/symbiohealth.1051

Awan, M. K. (2024). Impact of stress on students at the university level. *International Journal of Islamic Studies & Culture, 2*(1), 11–21. https://ijisc.com.pk/index.php/IJISC/article/view/609

ISSN (Online): 3006-2071 | ISSN (Print): 3006-2063
Volume 4 • Issue 5 • September 2026

Benítez-Agudelo, J. C., Restrepo, D., Navarro-Jimenez, E., & Clemente-Suárez, V. J. (2025). Longitudinal effects of stress in an academic context on psychological well-being, physiological markers, health behaviours, and academic performance in university students. *BMC Psychology, 13*(1), 1–14. https://doi.org/10.1186/s40359-025-03041-z

Bukhari, S. R., & Ejaz, T. (2020). Relationship between psychological distress, coping strategies, and adjustment to university life among university freshmen. *Pakistan Journal of Medical Research, 59*(2), 66–69. https://pjmr.org.pk/index.php/pjmr/article/view/113

Bukhari, S., Khan, A., & Bukhary, F. (2024). A predictive relationship between academic resilience and stress of university students. *FWU Journal of Social Sciences, 18*(2), 45–58. https://ojs.sbbwu.edu.pk/fwujournal/index.php/ojss/article/view/2651

Buriro, S. A., Joseph, N. W., Channar, H. B., Lolai, M. B., Ahmed, A., Javed, U., & Ali, K. (2024). Analyse the stress levels and coping strategies among nursing students. *Kurdish Studies, 12*(5), 1837–1843. https://doi.org/10.53555/ks.v12i5.3602

Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.

Domaley, V. L., Senyametor, F., Yusif, B. D., Antwia, A., & Nkrumah, K. (2023). Relationship between academic stress and thesis completion among university postgraduate students. *Asian Journal of Education and Social Studies, 41*(2), 7–21. https://doi.org/10.9734/AJESS/2023/v41i2890

Gmelch, W. H. (1982). *Beyond stress to effective management*. John Wiley & Sons.

Gondal, H. M., Afzal, R., Masood, A., Moeen-Ud-Din, M. B., Ahmed, A., & Iqbal, U. (2025). Causes of academic stress and coping strategies among undergraduate medical students in Pakistan. *Journal of the College of Physicians and Surgeons Pakistan, 35*(2), 174–179. https://doi.org/10.29271/jcpsp.2025.02.174

Islam, S. (2023). Academic stress and harassment: A study of university students' life in Islamabad and Peshawar campuses. *Review of Law and Social Sciences, 1*(4), 23–28. https://reviewlawsocialsciences.com/index.php/rlss/article/view/18

Jamali, Y. A., Khan, J. A., Jamali, I. A., Shah, H., Jeetendar, & Kumari, R. (2024). Depression, anxiety, and stress among undergraduate students of Shah Abdul Latif University, Khairpur. *Pakistan Journal of Health Sciences, 5*(4), 99–104. https://doi.org/10.54393/pjhs.v5i04.1384

Jamil, B., Shaheen, M., Asim, N., Khan, M. A., & Baseer, M. (2026). Factors influencing postgraduate students' academic performance: A qualitative study. *Journal of Gandhara Medical and Dental Science, 13*(2), 12–17. https://doi.org/10.37762/jgmds.13-2.815

Javaid, Z. K., Chen, Z., & Ramzan, M. (2024). Assessing stress causing factors and language related challenges among first year students in higher institutions in Pakistan. *Acta Psychologica, 248*, 104356. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.actpsy.2024.104356

Lazarus, R. S., & Folkman, S. (1984). *Stress, appraisal, and coping*. Springer. https://books.google.com/books?id=i-ySQQuUpr8C

ISSN (Online): 3006-2071 | ISSN (Print): 3006-2063
Volume 4 • Issue 5 • September 2026

Liu, S., Wang, X., Teng, H., Gao, W., Wang, J., Xu, F., Song, M., & Yang, L. (2024). Supervisor-postgraduate relationship and perceived stress: The mediating role of self-efficacy and the moderating role of psychological resilience. *BMC Psychology, 12*(1), 769. https://doi.org/10.1186/s40359-024-02251-1

Meena, A., Anjum, A., Mushtaq, M., & Anwar, T. (2024). Stress, causes of stress and coping strategies of Pakistani medical students. *Pakistan Journal of Medical Research, 63*(3), 117–120. https://pjmr.org.pk/index.php/pjmr/article/view/362

Mercer, J., & Thomas, J. (2024). How understanding doctoral researchers' coping strategies can inform higher education institutions' response to their stress. *Research in Post-Compulsory Education, 29*(1), 117–137. https://doi.org/10.1080/13596748.2023.2285632

Misra, R., & McKean, M. (2000). Academic stress among college students: Comparison of American and international students. *International Journal of Stress Management, 7*(2), 132–148. https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1009591813208

Naz, H. M., & Qureshi, A. M. (2024). Use of cognitive emotion regulation strategies and their association with academic burnout of university students. *Pakistan Social Sciences Review, 8*(3), 851–861. https://doi.org/10.35484/pssr.2024(8-III)68

Palinkas, L. A., Horwitz, S. M., Green, C. A., Wisdom, J. P., Duan, N., & Hoagwood, K. (2015). Purposeful sampling for qualitative data collection and analysis in mixed method implementation research. *Administration and Policy in Mental Health and Mental Health Services Research, 42*(5), 533–544. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10488-013-0528-y

Rehman, F., & Sajjad, S. (2024). Unlocking student satisfaction: The impact of therapeutic engagement in university counselling services. *International Research Journal of Management and Social Sciences, 5*(2), 311–321. https://irjmss.com/index.php/irjmss/article/view/309

Saeed, M., Ullah, Z., & Ahmad, I. (2020). A qualitative exploratory study of the factors causing academic stress in undergraduate students in Pakistan. *Liberal Arts and Social Sciences International Journal (LASSIJ), 4*(1), 203–223. https://doi.org/10.47264/idea.lassij/4.1.18

Saleem, T., Zia, A., & Mahmood, N. (2023). Profiling the factors affecting the social support and academic resilience of undergraduate university students. *Journal of Education and Humanities Research (JEHR), 16*(2), 62–80. https://journal.uob.edu.pk/journal/index.php/jehr/article/view/425

Saleem, T., & Zia, A. (2024). Effects of social support on academic resilience of undergraduate students. *UMT Education Review, 7*(1), 91–116. https://doi.org/10.32350/uer.71.06

ISSN (Online): 3006-2071 | ISSN (Print): 3006-2063
Volume 4 • Issue 5 • September 2026

Shahzadi, S., Munir, N., Ullah, N., Mahar, S., & Mahar, A. Q. (2024). Navigating university life: A qualitative study of social and academic challenges and coping strategies among introvert students in higher education. *Pakistan Journal of Social Science Review, 4*(5), 84–110. https://pjssrjournal.com/index.php/Journal/article/view/251

Shakeel, S., Fazal, S., & Majoka, M. I. (2022). Academic stress among university students in Pakistan: Causes and consequences. *Research Journal of Social Sciences and Economics Review, 3*(2), 27–34. https://doi.org/10.36902/rjsser-vol3-iss2-2022(27-34)

Soomra, N. U. A., Ahmad, I., Muntaha, S. T., & Aslam, J. (2024). The influence of positive thinking interventions on reducing academic stress among postgraduate students during thesis writing. *Social Science Review Archives, 2*(2), 1099–1108. https://doi.org/10.70670/sra.v2i2.160

Tariq, R., Maria, Jabeen, A., Murtaza, S., Dastgir, H., & Khalid, L. (2023). Stress and coping strategies among postgraduate medical students in Lahore. *The Healer Journal of Physiotherapy and Rehabilitation Sciences, 3*(3), 415–422. https://doi.org/10.55735/hjprs.v3i3.140

Waterhouse, P., & Samra, R. (2025). University students' coping strategies to manage stress: A scoping review. *Educational Review*, *77*(1), 1-29 https://doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2024.2438888

Zahid, S., Jamal, R., & Hassan, B. (2025). Role of perceived social support in stress, life satisfaction, and academic performance among university students. *Pakistan Journal of Psychological Research, 40*(1), 207–223. https://doi.org/10.33824/PJPR.2025.40.1.13

Zakaria, M. Z., Abdul Aziz, A. R., Mohd Shukor, N., Othman, M. F., & Abd. Hamid, M. A. (2021). Coping mechanism towards academic stress among students: An analysis from Islamic perspective. *Ulum Islamiyyah, 33*(1), 31–53. https://doi.org/10.33102/uij.vol33no1.194

Zile, A., Porter, B., Crozier, K., & Sanderson, K. (2023). The mental health of UK postgraduate research students following the COVID-19 pandemic. *Education Sciences, 13*(11), 1106. https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci1311110 6