

Bridging Stress and Satisfaction: A Cognitive and Theoretical Approach Using TTSC and Adlerian Therapy

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Abstract

Stress among university students has been increasing, especially in the post-pandemic period as students face various problems in adjusting to in-person learning settings. This research examines the correlation between stress, cognitive evaluation, and life satisfaction among first- and second-year students at a public university in Malaysia. This study employs the Transactional Theory of Stress and Coping (TTSC) and Adlerian Therapy as theoretical frameworks to elucidate the role of cognitive appraisal on students' perceptions of stress and its effects on their well-being. Data were gathered from 86 participants using validated instruments: The Perceived Stress Scale (PSS-10), Stress Appraisal Measure (SAM), and Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS). Research indicates that most students encounter modest levels of stress, cognitive evaluation, and life satisfaction. No significant correlation was seen between stress and life satisfaction; however, cognitive appraisal exhibited a positive correlation with life satisfaction, highlighting the significance of adaptive interpretations of stressors. A significant correlation between stress and cognitive appraisal was identified, indicating increased stress levels among students actively involved in assessment processes. These results highlight the need for treatments that enhance students' evaluation and coping mechanisms while cultivating purpose and connection to boost resilience and general well-being.

Keywords: Stress, Cognitive Evaluation, Life Satisfaction, Transactional Theory of Stress and Coping (TTSC), Adlerian Therapy

Introduction

Stress or strain is characterized as a form of alteration that induces physical, emotional, and psychological stress. It is a bodily response to stimuli necessitating attention and action (Scott, 2020). The number of college students who are under stress is increasing every day as a result of the epidemic both domestically and internationally. Following Malaysia's declaration of

Covid-19 as endemic, university students are required to return to college for offline study. University students encounter numerous problems when adapting to a new environment, which ultimately results in stress (Azlan et al., 2023).

Considering the escalating stress levels among university students as they acclimate to new post-pandemic surroundings, it is essential to comprehend how students perceive and react to these obstacles. The concept of cognitive assessment is of considerable importance here. Cognitive evaluation, however rather obscure to the local populace, denotes an individual's interpretation of a situation, which directly affects their perception of its stressfulness. Individuals evaluate and determine the significance of a circumstance to their well-being through cognitive appraisal, which informs their coping mechanisms in reaction to stress. As students navigate stress, their perceptions and responses—shaped by cognitive appraisal—significantly impact their overall psychological well-being.

Life satisfaction is a fundamental aspect of well-being, representing an individual's assessment of their quality of life across various domains, including finances, employment, health, and relationships (Diener et al., 2018; Pavot & Diener, 2008). Although life satisfaction has been extensively examined in professional contexts, there is a lack of studies focusing on the relationship among stress, cognitive evaluation, and life satisfaction in university students. For several undergraduates, balancing academic demands, financial obligations, and adult decision-making, frequently while residing away from home for the first time, can significantly impact their emotional, social, and academic well-being (Baghurst & Kelly, 2014).

Research indicates that college freshmen encountering substantial life stressors in their inaugural year face a heightened risk of academic failure and health complications, which adversely affects their overall life satisfaction as they strive to achieve personal and academic objectives (Budny & Paul, 2003; Cole et al., 2019; Hughes, 2005). In contrast to the organized contexts of their previous experiences, university life necessitates independent living abilities that, in the absence of effective coping mechanisms, may result in emotional pain and enduring impacts on their quality of life (Patrick et al., 1992).

Previous research has predominantly examined stress and life satisfaction in working people and teachers, with little studies addressing these concerns specifically among university students. This study seeks to address that gap by investigating stress, cognitive assessment, and life satisfaction in students. Understanding the impact of cognitive evaluation on stress perception and life satisfaction is essential for enabling students to handle stress proactively. By comprehending these connections, pupils can enhance their well-being, enabling them to make informed decisions that elevate their life happiness. To rectify these deficiencies, we utilized a quantitative methodology, administering questionnaires to examine the correlation between stress, cognitive evaluation, and life satisfaction among university students.

Theoretical Underlying

As stress levels increase among university students confronting the realities of post-pandemic campus life, it is crucial to comprehend their interpretations and coping mechanisms about these issues. The Transactional Theory of Stress and Coping (TTSC) proposed by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) elucidates that stress pertains not only to external events but also to our

interpretation of those events. TTSC presents two primary methods for students to evaluate stressful circumstances:

- i. *Primary Appraisal*: In this initial phase, a pupil assesses whether a situation is perceived as hazardous, manageable, or inconsequential. This initial response shapes the emotional atmosphere they contribute to the scenario.
- ii. *Secondary Appraisal*: Following the assessment of the circumstance, the student contemplates their capacity to manage it. They may evaluate their study habits, support system, or mindset to determine their preparedness for the challenge. When students perceive a deficiency in necessary resources, the problem might escalate from something achievable to a significant source of stress.

TTSC demonstrates that stress arises not solely from the challenges students encounter, but also from the resources they perceive themselves to possess for overcoming those challenges. Some students may employ problem-focused coping by enhancing their time management skills or seeking academic assistance, while others may rely on friends or family for support. For counselors, TTSC serves as an invaluable framework that enables students to reframe their perspectives, perceiving difficult situations not as impassable but as challenges to be addressed with appropriate support.

Another theory to consider is Adlerian Theory. This theory offers a valuable perspective by emphasizing students' sense of belonging and purpose (Mosak & Maniaci, 2014). Adler believed that a sense of connection with others and the establishment of clear, meaningful objectives are fundamental to well-being. A significant number of students, particularly those who experienced isolation during the pandemic, encounter a sense of disconnection when entering university, exacerbating their stress levels. Adlerian Therapy underscores the significance of connections and the pursuit of purpose, motivating students to establish personal objectives that correspond with their values. Through interpersonal connections, students can cultivate the confidence necessary to confront life's problems. Adler's perspective emphasizes that stress need not serve as an impediment; rather, it can facilitate personal development. A student experiencing academic pressure may establish manageable, incremental objectives and cultivate supportive relationships to alleviate their burden. This journey corresponds with Adler's concept that well-being is a pathway to a life imbued with purpose, connection, and resilience.

TTSC and Adlerian Therapy collectively provide a human-centric perspective on stress, emphasizing the significance of students' interpretations and responses to their experiences. This research expands upon these concepts within the context of university life, examining how students' perceptions of stress influence their coping mechanisms and overall life satisfaction. Utilizing these theories enables students to develop abilities for stress management, adapt to their new surroundings, and eventually cultivate a life characterized by resilience and purpose.

Research Methodology

This study utilized a quantitative correlational method to investigate the links among stress, cognitive evaluation, and life satisfaction in university students. The study focused on first- and second-year university students, a cohort often experiencing significant life transitions while adapting to academic demands and personal changes. The sample consisted of single

female students aged 18 to 30 from a public university in Malaysia, selected using a random sampling method. This cohort was chosen to examine the influence of specific stressors on their well-being and overall satisfaction. Three validated instruments have been employed to elucidate these dynamics:

- i. *The Perceived Stress Scale (PSS-10)*, created by Cohen et al. (1983), is a well-established instrument that assesses the extent to which students view their lives as stressful. The PSS-10, which includes questions concerning feelings of control and overwhelm, offered an overview of the students' stress levels throughout the preceding month.
- ii. *The Stress Appraisal Measure (SAM)*, developed by Peacock and Wong in 1990, was utilized to analyze students' interpretations of environmental stressors. This measure examines how students perceive obstacles as dangers, opportunities, or neutral occurrences, giving insights into their cognitive evaluation mechanisms.
- iii. *The Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS)*, developed by Diener et al. in 1985, measures life satisfaction, enabling students to evaluate their overall quality of life. The SWLS prompted students to evaluate their well-being in domains such as relationships, academic accomplishments, and personal development through straightforward yet impactful suggestions.

The data gathered through these instruments were examined utilizing descriptive and inferential statistics. Pearson Correlation analysis was utilized to assess the degree and direction of the correlations among stress, cognitive evaluation, and life satisfaction. This method elucidated the interactions among these variables, highlighting potential areas for intervention and assistance.

The study concentrated on this demographic and these characteristics to elucidate the obstacles encountered by university students and establish a basis for focused efforts to improve their well-being. The findings provide significant insights for students, educators, counselors, and policy-makers committed to fostering a conducive academic environment.

Results and Discussion

The initial participants of the study comprised 140 students from the faculty. Nevertheless, merely 86 students have submitted a completed questionnaire. Respondent profiles are analyzed based on gender, age, race, and status. The total comprises 24 males and 62 females. A total of 15 respondents are aged 18 to 20 years, while the remaining 71 respondents are aged 21 to 30 years. All individuals are single, with a recorded majority of 79 Malays, 4 Chinese, 1 Indian, and the remainder classified as others.

Stress Levels, Cognitive Appraisal, and Life Satisfaction

The findings indicate that quite a few of students encounter moderate levels of stress, cognitive appraisal, and life satisfaction. This moderate stress level indicates that, although students are adjusting to university life, especially in the post-pandemic context, their stress remains manageable for most of them. The Transactional Theory of Stress and Coping (TTSC) posited by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) asserts that stress emerges when an individual perceives demands as surpassing their coping capabilities. For these students, moderate stress levels may suggest that they regard most stressors as manageable, consistent with TTSC's perspective that stress is shaped by individual interpretations of circumstances.

The majority of students demonstrated moderate cognitive appraisal, indicating a fundamental capacity to evaluate and interpret stressors, while they could gain from more advanced coping strategies. The moderate evaluations of life satisfaction show that students are generally content, however could enhance their well-being with assistance in goal-setting, resilience development, and social interaction.

Table 1

Level of Stress, Cognitive Appraisal and Life Satisfaction among Students

Variables	Level	Stress	%	Cognitive Appraisal	%	Life Satisfaction	%
	Low	31	36.0	2	2.3	7	8.1
	Moderate	53	61.6	68	79.1	40	46.5
	High	2	2.3	16	18.6	39	45.3

These findings indicate the necessity for tailored interventions that improve students' evaluative skills and coping strategies. By developing these competencies, university counselors can assist students in adopting constructive assessments, fostering a transition from perceiving stressors as solely detrimental to recognizing them as chances for development.

Correlation between Stress and Life Satisfaction

The absence of a significant relationship between stress and life satisfaction ($r = -0.125$, $\rho = 0.250$) indicates that stress by itself does not directly reduce students' life satisfaction. TTSC asserts that stress adversely affects well-being primarily when individuals believe they lack the resources to manage demands. This study indicates that the lack of a robust association suggests students might have supportive factors, such as family, classmates, or academic assistance, which minimize the impact of stress on life satisfaction. Adlerian Therapy believes that purpose and connection are fundamental to life satisfaction (Corey, 2017); students who find significance in their academic and personal objectives may experience life satisfaction regardless of moderate stress levels. This corresponds with the findings, as numerous students sustain a satisfactory level of contentment despite encountering everyday academic and social stresses.

These findings underscore that university counseling should prioritize not only stress alleviation but also the augmentation of students' sense of purpose and belonging. Utilizing Adlerian ideas, counselors can assist students in establishing significant goals and fostering supportive relationships, thus providing a sense of fulfillment that minimizes stress.

The Correlation between Cognitive Appraisal and Life Satisfaction

The positive correlation between cognitive evaluation and life satisfaction ($r = 0.276$, $\rho = 0.010$) highlights the significance of students' interpretations and responses to difficulties. Cognitive evaluation is essential in TTSC terminology, as it influences whether students perceive stressors as threats or as challenges to be overcome. This outcome indicates that students who employ adaptive cognitive appraisals—perceiving challenges as manageable or conducive to growth—generally experience higher life satisfaction. When students reinterpret stresses as opportunities, they cultivate resilience, a vital component of well-being.

Adlerian Therapy enhances this by emphasizing the development of an attitude toward growth in students. Adler believes that life pleasure arises from the attainment of goals that correspond with an individual's ideals and desires. Consequently, students who see obstacles positively and regard them as conducive to their academic and personal development are likely to attain a sense of contentment. This correlation underscores the importance of providing students with cognitive appraisal strategies, such as positive reframing and problem-solving, enabling them to pursue their objectives and duties with assurance and intent. Adlerian-based counseling interventions can assist students in developing these skills, therefore improving their overall life happiness (Corey, 2017).

Correlation between Stress and Cognitive Appraisal

The notable positive correlation between stress and cognitive appraisal ($r = 0.380$, $p = 0.001$) indicates that students who actively participate in cognitive appraisal are likely to suffer heightened stress levels. This outcome aligns with TTSC, which asserts that stress emerges from the constant interaction between an individual and their environment. Active participation in appraisal procedures increases the likelihood that students will evaluate and react to stressors, hence enhancing their awareness of stressful demands. TTSC underscores that cognitive evaluation may result in constructive coping mechanisms when individuals believe they possess the capacity to manage the perceived pressures.

This positive link suggests that cognitive appraisal, although essential, could increase stress perception in students who lack sufficient coping abilities (Roberts, 2020; Folkman, 2013). This understanding underscores the necessity for counselors to balance cognitive appraisal skills with practical stress management approaches, such as mindfulness or relaxation training, to assist students in managing elevated stress without becoming overwhelmed. Adlerian Therapy provides pertinent tools by promoting self-efficacy and self-awareness in students, enabling them to manage their stress responses and pursue constructive, personally significant objectives.

Practical Implications

The findings indicate that cognitive evaluation is a pivotal component affecting stress perception and life satisfaction, rendering it a significant focus for university counseling interventions. TTSC offers counselors a framework for instructing kids in deliberate situational assessment and the development of proactive coping mechanisms. Counselors can assist students with reappraisal, enabling them to convert perceived stressors into manageable difficulties, consistent with TTSC's perspective that stress is partially a function of perception.

Simultaneously, Adlerian Therapy provides supplementary tactics by emphasizing the establishment of worthwhile goals and the cultivation of connections that augment students' sense of belonging. Counselors can apply Adlerian ideas to facilitate students' alignment of academic objectives with their overarching values, so enhancing their feeling of purpose. When students experience a greater connection to their objectives and community, they may manage stress more effectively without sacrificing life happiness.

This study addresses the deficiency in current literature regarding university students' stress and life satisfaction, providing a basis for targeted interventions that incorporate TTSC and Adlerian Therapy. Future study may investigate targeted therapies that integrate

cognitive appraisal training with stress management strategies, establishing a comprehensive support system to assist students in addressing their distinct issues. These insights eventually promote a comprehensive approach that enhances resilience, life satisfaction, and mental well-being among university students.

Conclusion

This research explains the obstacles university students have while navigating academic expectations, personal development, and the residual impacts of a post-pandemic environment. This study emphasizes that, while stress is a common aspect of student life, it is not the stress itself that is significant, but rather the students' interpretation and response to it. Cognitive evaluation, the process by which pupils evaluate and interpret stressful events, significantly influences their overall life happiness. Individuals who see problems as chances for development often experience more fulfillment and competence, even during difficult times.

The research indicates that students who actively assess their stresses often experience greater pressure. This emphasizes that while contemplation is beneficial, it is equally crucial to complement such introspection with effective coping mechanisms and a supportive network to alleviate stress.

The results highlight the need for institutions to go beyond just addressing stress. Students need resources and direction to assist them in redefining problems, establishing significant objectives, and fostering relationships that impart a sense of purpose to their life. The theories examined—Transactional Theory of Stress and Coping (TTSC) and Adlerian Therapy—demonstrate that resilience is not a random occurrence. It is developed via self-awareness, constructive connections, and the assurance to confront life's challenges.

Limitations of Study and Suggestions for Future Studies

Even though the study explores the relationship between stress, cognitive appraisal, and life satisfaction among university students, it still has limitations such as a small sample size of 86 participants, a cross-sectional design, self-reported measures, lack of qualitative insights, and a limited scope of variables. Future research should include longitudinal studies to track changes in stress levels, cross-cultural comparisons to understand cultural norms, incorporate interventions to test the effectiveness of programs, explore social support systems, and use mixed-methods approaches to understand the interplay between stress, cognitive appraisal, and life satisfaction. Expanding the research to include diverse demographics and non-academic contexts could also offer broader applications. By addressing these limitations, researchers and practitioners can develop a more comprehensive understanding of how to support university students in managing stress, enhancing cognitive appraisal, and achieving greater life satisfaction, ultimately contributing to the development of resilient and purpose-driven individuals.

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