

## PERCEIVED ACADEMIC STRESS AND COPING STRATEGIES: GENDER-BASED ANALYSIS OF MANAGEMENT UNDERGRADUATES OF A STATE UNIVERSITY IN SRI LANKA

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### Abstract

Ensuring the mental health and psychological well-being of undergraduates has become a significant concern in higher education, with gender differences playing a vital role in the dynamics of stress perception and coping mechanisms. Therefore, this quantitative study aims to examine gender differences in perceived academic stress and the various gendered coping strategies employed to manage it. Data were collected through a structured questionnaire from 75 women and 75 men enrolled in management degree programs at a selected university in Sri Lanka. The overall mean scores reveal that academic stress is a common experience among students in the faculty, with students reporting relatively moderate to high levels of academic stress. Among the respondents, women reported experiencing more academic stress than men. Although both male and female students encounter academic stress, their experiences and coping strategies differ. Women, despite employing a wider range of coping strategies, both active and passive, still reported higher stress levels, suggesting that the strategies they use may not be sufficient to mitigate the intensity of academic stress. In contrast, men reported using fewer coping strategies, indicating either underreporting of stress or lower emotional engagement with academic stressors. The findings of the research emphasise how management undergraduates experience and manage their overwhelming academic stress. The gender-based differences in academic stress levels and coping mechanisms that were examined indicate that when universities are creating support services or interventions to help students manage academic stress, they should take their gender diversity into account.

**Keywords:** Academic stress, gender, stress coping

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DOI:

## **Introduction**

Academic stress and burnout have become major global mental health concerns and exert a significant impact on the quality of higher education. Numerous physiological, cognitive, emotional, and behavioural effects have been linked to overwhelming academic stress experienced by students (Lau et al., 2020). The physiological effects of academic stress include headaches, muscle tension, altered breathing patterns, increased heart rate, elevated blood pressure, and disturbed sleep patterns (Fuente et al., 2021). Additionally, as cognitive effects of academic stress, students frequently experience increased anxiety, excessive worry, a sense of helplessness, and persistent negative thoughts (Garett et al., 2017). Furthermore, stress causes emotional instability, fear, guilt, and irritability (Kumaraswamy, 2013; Masood et al., 2018). Moreover, aggressive behaviour, self-harming tendencies, frequent crying, or a dependence on drugs as a coping method are all behavioural manifestations of academic stress (Reddy et al., 2018). Therefore, beyond just causing immediate psychological distress, these detrimental effects of academic stress have a substantial impact on students' academic performance and general well-being.

In the Sri Lankan context, Gamage et al. (2024) exposed that both male and female undergraduates suffer from moderate to high perceived stress. As revealed by Liyanage et al. (2024) majority of medical students (69.2%) experienced some form of distress (depression, anxiety or stress), while 23% had distress in all three. Accordingly, this study aims to investigate whether there is a significant difference in academic stress levels experienced by men and women who are studying in a management faculty of a selected state university in Sri Lanka. Furthermore, this study reveals different coping strategies employed by men and women in terms of managing their stress levels. The curricula and academic programs offered by the selected management faculty are structured to cultivate competent professionals, preparing future managers and entrepreneurs to thrive in both local and international markets. Students engage in specialised study areas such as Accounting, Finance, Marketing, Operations, Human Resource Management, Information Technology, Economics, and General Management, enabling them to adapt to diverse business environments. The faculty serves large student populations with diverse first languages (usually Sinhala and Tamil) but shares English as the medium of instruction. By exploring gendered academic stress and coping mechanisms, this research aims to support student well-being, enhance academic outcomes, and guide university administrators and policymakers in implementing targeted, effective support strategies.

Recent research has extensively explored various dimensions of academic stress, including its influencing factors (e.g., Limone & Toto, 2021; Olivera et al., 2023), the coping strategies employed by university students (e.g., Awoke et al., 2021; Joseph et al., 2020), and the psychological and physiological consequences of stress (e.g., Alhamed, 2023; Gardani et al., 2022). Additionally, a number of studies have examined gender differences in perceived levels of academic stress (Graves et al., 2021) and the distinct coping mechanisms adopted by male and female students (Freire et al., 2016). In the local context, there are plenty of academic stress-related research covering areas like academic stressors (E.g., Gamage et al., 2024; Liyanage et al., 2024; Kithmini et al., 2024), academic stress symptoms and consequences of stress (E.g., Dahanayake, 2021; Thakshila & Suraweera, 2022), and stress coping strategies (E.g., Chandrasekara, 2023; Thakshila & Suraweera, 2024). However, despite these contributions, limited attention has been given to understanding how these gendered experiences and coping strategies play out among management undergraduates, particularly in a global south context where English is the medium of instruction but not the first language. This study addresses that gap by investigating gender-based differences in academic stress and coping mechanisms among management undergraduates.

This study is significant to understand the dynamics of gender-based differences in academic stress and coping strategies among university students. The findings of the study will support university administrators in designing targeted interventions to promote student well-being and reduce stress-related issues. Academic staff can use the insights to adopt more inclusive teaching and mentoring approaches. Furthermore, policymakers and higher education authorities can develop gender-sensitive support systems and mental health programs, ultimately fostering a healthier and more equitable learning environment for all students.

Accordingly, the objectives of this research are as follows:

RO1: To examine whether there is a significant difference between male and female undergraduates in their perception of academic stress within the Management Faculty of the selected state university.

RO2: To identify and compare the coping strategies used by male and female undergraduates to manage academic stress.

## Literature Review

### Academic stress

Stress is an inevitable part of everyday life, arising as a natural physiological and psychological response to situations that are perceived as difficult or threatening (World Health Organisation, 2023). It serves as a mechanism that motivates individuals to confront challenges and seek solutions (Córdova et al., 2023). However, research over the past few decades has highlighted the detrimental effects of prolonged or chronic stress. When stress persists over time, it can lead to serious mental health concerns such as anxiety, depression, and other psychological disorders (Pozos-Radillo et al., 2014; Towbes & Cohen, 1996). Long-term stress also impairs cognitive abilities, disrupts emotional balance, and reduces overall well-being and life satisfaction (O'Connor et al., 2021).

Academic stress has emerged as a pressing concern that demands attention within the university context (Alsultan et al., 2023). Academic stress encompasses the dual nature of stress, involving the challenges posed by academic demands and the individual's capacity to manage them (García-Martínez et al., 2021). Academic demands refer to the pressure students face due to exams, assignments, evaluations, and various other academic responsibilities (Emond et al., 2016). The capacity of the individual to manage stress is determined based on their resources, such as time, knowledge, or coping skills (García-Martínez et al., 2021). When these resources are insufficient to meet the demands placed upon the students, they get stressed overwhelmingly (García-Martínez et al., 2021).

A range of interrelated factors including perfectionism (Lau et al., 2020), feelings of isolation (Wang et al., 2023), uncertainty about career and professional pathways (Guzmán et al., 2023; Joseph et al., 2020), low self-efficacy (Lau et al., 2020; Olivera et al., 2023), academic performance pressure (Cokley et al., 2017), the challenge of balancing studies with income-generating activities (Lopes & Nihei, 2021; McCloud & Bann, 2019), social anxiety (Lau et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2023), excessive academic workload (Paudel et al., 2024; Satpathy et al., 2021), language barriers (Alam et al., 2024; Ali et al., 2020), and experiences of bullying and discrimination within the university setting (Limone & Toto, 2021) have been identified as the frequently experienced sources of academic stress among the university students. These stressors not only hinder students' academic performance and psychological well-being but also contribute to increased dropout rates and reduced overall engagement in the university learning environment (Ansari et al., 2014; Lee et al., 2011; Sinval et al., 2024). Consequently, ensuring students' well-being is a crucial task for their professional and personal success of the students since high levels of well-being lead to more effective learning, creativity, productivity, and social relationships (Ruggeri et al., 2020). Therefore, examining the dynamics of academic stress is crucial in developing effective interventions aimed at managing this significant issue and enhancing the overall quality of higher education.

### Stress coping strategies

The way individuals cope with stress and regulate their emotions contributes to explaining students' adaptation to stress (Teixeira et al., 2021). Coping is generally regarded as a stabilising factor that assists an individual in adapting to various stressful events (Satpathy et al., 2021). Coping with academic stress can be defined as the collective interaction of cognitive, affective, and behavioural mechanisms students utilise to constructively manage the various demands and challenges they face in an academic environment (Kirikkanat & Soyer, 2016). Table 1 demonstrates the various classifications of academic stress coping strategies in contemporary literature.

**Table 1**  
*Classifications of academic stress coping strategies*

Author/s	Classification of stress coping strategies	Meaning	Examples
Joseph et al., 2020; Lin & Chen, 2010	Active emotional coping strategies	Adopting the attitude of emotional adjustment when faced with academic stress	Positive thinking and self-encouragement
	Active problem coping strategies	Dealing with academic stress by focusing on the centre of the problem and finding a solution themselves by being calm and optimistic, or by searching for assistance from external sources	Seeking counsellors and discussing the stressful situation with lecturers and peers
	Passive emotional coping strategies	Managing stress by regulating emotions without directly addressing the stressor	Constraining emotions, self-accusation, getting angry, blaming others or God, or giving up.
	Passive problem coping strategies	Avoiding or delaying direct action to resolve the stressor	Procrastination, evasive behaviours, or going into alcohol or drug abuse
Sullivan, 2009	Approach coping strategies	Involve active efforts to change stressors	Creating a study schedule, seeking clarification from professors or tutors, and breaking down large assignments into manageable tasks
	Avoidant coping strategies	Include escaping or denying the problem.	Ignoring deadlines and procrastinating on assignments, engaging in excessive screen time

			(social media, gaming) to distract from stress, and avoiding attending lectures or discussions about difficult subjects
	Social support strategies	Rely on others for help or consultation in resolving the issue	Discussing academic challenges with friends or family, joining study groups, and seeking counselling services
Awoke et al., 2021	Humor	Reframe stressful academic situations in a more positive or lighthearted manner.	Joking about academic challenges, using self-deprecating humour, or engaging in humorous conversations with peers to relieve stress
	Religious strategies	provides emotional support, meaning, and a sense of control in stressful situations	prayer, meditation, faith in a higher power, attending religious gatherings, or seeking guidance from religious texts or leaders

(Source: Authors' compilation)

Gender differences in academic coping strategies have been the focus of numerous studies (Freire et al., 2016). For example, when it comes to coping with academic stress, men are more likely to use problem-focused coping and passive emotional coping (Joseph et al., 2020). In addition, women are more likely to use active problem coping strategies to deal with the stress of their studies. Similarly, Hefner and Eisenberg (2009) discovered that male students perceive social support less than female students do. Furthermore, emotion-focused coping strategies like self-distraction, seeking emotional support, and using instrumental support are more common among female students (Graves, 2021). These results show that compared to men, women frequently approach academic stress with higher emotional resilience and a more positive outlook on problems.

**Gender difference and academic stress**

According to recent studies on the gender dynamics of stress, women get more stressed than men (Doyle-Baker et al., 2018). This pattern is also seen in higher education, where female students report much higher levels of academic stress than their male counterparts (Asensio-Martínez et al., 2023; Graves et al., 2021; Iskandar et al., 2024). As claimed by Kumari and Singh (2022), female students are more impacted by academic stress than male students. According to the perceived academic stress scale presented by Barbayannis et al. (2022), women and non-binary students reported higher levels of academic stress than men. Furthermore, Kristensen et al. (2023) found that academic stress had a stronger psychological impact on female students, but that it was more strongly associated with interpersonal factors such as academic self-efficacy and social distress in male students. Accordingly, the hypothesis of the study can be stated as follows:

H0: *There is no significant difference between men and women in their perception of academic stress.*

H1: *There is a significant difference between men and women in their perception of academic stress.*

**Research methods**

This study adopts a quantitative research approach, grounded in positivist philosophy, which emphasises the discovery of objective reality. Utilising a survey strategy, the research aims to determine whether there is a significant difference between men and women in their perception of academic stress, as well as to examine gender-based differences in academic stress coping strategies, using statistical analysis of quantitative data.

For data collection, the researchers administered a structured questionnaire developed through Google Forms and disseminated it among the target population via WhatsApp using a convenience sampling technique. Researchers were unable to obtain access to the official repository of students' email addresses or contact numbers, which limited the possibility of conducting a probability-based sampling. Therefore, researchers adopted a convenience sampling approach by distributing the questionnaire through the official and informal WhatsApp groups of all faculty batches. As there was no verifiable evidence confirming that all students were members of these groups, researchers employed convenience sampling to ensure methodological transparency and accuracy in reporting. A total of 150 responses were obtained, 75 men and 75 women who are pursuing management degree programs from the selected faculty. The questionnaire included multiple-choice questions to gather demographic information such as gender, year of study, and area of specialisation. To measure academic stress, respondents rated their agreement with five statements on a 5-point Likert scale (ranging from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree). Academic stress was measured using five items adapted from the Academic Stress Scale developed by Bedewy and Gabriel (2015). The reliability of the data collection instrument was measured using Cronbach's Alpha value. The Alpha values of the academic stress variable were 0.874 (above 0.7), indicating that the internal consistency among the items in an acceptable level.

Data were analysed using SPSS version 2.0. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, and means, were used to summarise and describe the data. Frequencies and percentages were employed to present demographic information, while mean analysis was conducted to assess the current levels of academic stress experienced by men and women. Additionally, frequencies were used to explore the gendered use of four types of coping strategies: active emotional coping, active problem coping, passive emotional coping, and passive problem coping. For hypothesis testing specifically, whether there is a significant difference between male and female students in their perception of academic stress, the researchers applied an independent samples t-test, assuming equal variances.

Ethical considerations were strictly adhered to ensure the study’s credibility, confidentiality, and trustworthiness. Participation was entirely voluntary; no students were coerced or influenced to complete the questionnaire. Anonymity of responses was maintained, and the collected data will be used solely for academic purposes, not for any commercial or non-academic use.

## Findings

In analysing the data, the researchers first tested for any missing values and outliers. Once the data cleaning and screening process was completed, descriptive analysis was conducted to summarise the sample demographics. Thereafter, a mean value analysis was performed for each item used to measure academic stress, and the overall average academic stress level was also calculated to assess the current level of academic stress experienced by the faculty students. Next, the researchers analysed how students from the two gender categories (men and women) utilised active and passive emotion-focused and problem-focused coping strategies in terms of frequency. Finally, using an independent samples t-test, the researchers examined whether there was a significant difference between male and female students in their perception of academic stress.

### Descriptive analysis for demographic data

A frequency and percentage analysis was conducted to present the composition of respondents based on their demographic information. The researchers considered key demographic variables, including respondents’ gender, degree year, and area of specialisation. In this context, all first-year students in the faculty are necessarily enrolled in the Management Common Program. From the second year onward, students pursue specialised areas in management as part of their degree program.

**Table 2**  
*Demographic information of respondents*

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Men	75	50.0
Women	75	50.0
Degree Year		
Year 1	21	14.0
Year 2	34	22.7
Year 3	42	28.0
Year 4	53	35.3
Degree Specialization		
Accounting	15	10.0
Commerce	13	8.7
Business Administration	54	36.0
Economics	6	4.0
Entrepreneurship	2	1.3
Estate Management & Valuation	7	4.7
Finance	9	6.0
Human Resource Management	3	2.0
Information Technology	3	2.0
Marketing	7	4.7
Decision Sciences	7	4.7
Public Administration	3	2.0
Management Common Program	21	14.0

(Source: Survey data)

According to Table 2, the sample consisted of an equal representation of gender, with 75 male students (50.0%) and 75 female students (50.0%), ensuring a balanced gender distribution for analysis. Respondents participated across all four academic years of their degree programs. The largest proportion of students was in Year 4 (n = 53, 35.3%), followed by Year 3 (n = 42, 28.0%), Year 2 (n = 31, 20.7%), and Year 1 (n = 24, 16.0%). This indicates that most participants were senior undergraduates. In terms of degree specialisation, students represented a wide range of academic disciplines. The most common specialisation was Business Administration (n = 54, 36.0%), followed by Management Common Program (n = 21, 14.0%), and Accounting (n = 15, 10.0%). Other notable areas included Commerce (8.7%), Finance (6.0%), and Economics (4.0%). Smaller proportions of students specialised in Marketing, Decision Sciences, Estate Management & Valuation (each 4.7%), as well as Human Resource Management, Public Administration, and Information Technology (each 2.0%). Entrepreneurship was the least represented specialisation area, with only 2 students (1.3%). As per the demographic information presented in Table 2, the dataset reflects a diverse and balanced sample in terms of gender, academic year, and disciplinary background.

**Mean value analysis**

A mean value analysis was conducted on the items used to reveal how different dimensions contribute to overall academic stress. The overall average mean value of all the items was calculated to determine the current level of stress experienced by the faculty students.

**Table 3**  
*Mean value analysis of stress items*

Items	Mean	Std. Deviation
I often feel overwhelmed because of the academic demands placed on me	4.03	.798
I experience physical symptoms (e.g., headaches, fatigue) due to academic stress	3.62	.974
The pressure of exams and coursework causes me emotional distress	3.79	.929
I struggle to cope with stress related to my academic responsibilities	3.79	.864
Academic stress negatively affects my motivation and well-being	3.52	.932
Mean Stress	3.75	.702

(Source: Survey data)

As per the results presented in Table 3, the analysis of the academic stress items reveals that students generally reported experiencing moderate to high levels of stress across different dimensions. The highest mean score was recorded for the item ‘I often feel overwhelmed because of the academic demands placed on me’ (M = 4.03, SD = 0.798), indicating that most students frequently feel overwhelmed by their academic workload. This suggests that academic pressure is a major source of stress for most participants. The items ‘The pressure of exams and coursework causes me emotional distress’ and ‘I struggle to cope with stress related to my academic responsibilities’ both had identical mean scores of 3.79, with standard deviations of 0.929 and 0.864, respectively. These findings reflect a common experience of emotional and coping-related challenges among students. Additionally, the item ‘I experience physical symptoms (e.g., headaches, fatigue) due to academic stress’ showed a slightly lower mean score of 3.62 (SD = 0.974). It suggests that physical manifestations of stress are present, but they may vary more widely among students.

The item ‘Academic stress negatively affects my motivation and well-being’ (M = 3.52, SD = 0.932) reported the lowest mean value, but it still indicates a moderate impact. The overall mean stress score across all items was 3.75 (SD = 0.702). It reflects a generally high level of perceived academic stress among the students surveyed. The relatively low standard deviation suggests that this perception of stress is shared consistently across the sample.

**Gender and academic stress coping strategies**

In this section, the researchers analysed the usage of different coping strategies employed by male and female students to manage the academic stress they experienced. In the questionnaire, respondents were asked to indicate whether they used each coping strategy by selecting “Yes” or “No.” Frequencies were analysed to determine the extent to which each coping strategy was used by male and female students.

**Table 4**  
*Gender and specific coping strategies*

Coping strategies	Frequencies		
	Men	Women	Total
Active emotional coping strategies			
Talking to friends, family, or mentors about academic struggles	57	59	116
Engaging in relaxation techniques to reduce stress (E.g., meditation, mindfulness exercises)	12	23	35
Exercising, yoga, or going for a walk	12	9	21
Reframing academic challenges as opportunities for growth	32	23	55
Writing in a journal, engaging in creative activities, or talking to a counsellor	13	15	28

Active problem coping strategies			
Time Management & Prioritisation	54	51	105
Dividing coursework into smaller, achievable tasks	26	34	60
Consulting lecturers, tutors, or peers for a better understanding	16	25	41
Using active recall, mind mapping, or group studies to enhance learning	18	19	37
Establishing achievable academic targets to avoid unnecessary stress	26	24	50
Passive emotional coping strategies			
Watching movies or playing games, or any other entertainment activity	46	56	102
Sleeping or resting more	43	53	96
Eating comfort food	17	27	44
Mentally disconnecting from academic challenges	13	12	25
Ignoring conversations about academics to reduce stress	12	18	30
Using alcohol	4	1	5
Passive problem coping strategies			
Procrastination	18	33	51
Avoiding responsibilities	19	15	34
Blaming external factors	11	23	34
Relying on luck or fate	15	15	30
Withdrawing from academic activities	20	14	34

(Source: Survey data)

As illustrated in Table 4, the gender wise frequency analysis of coping strategies reveals differences in how men and women manage academic stress. In terms of active emotional coping strategies, both men (57) and women (59) showed a strong tendency to talk to friends, family, or mentors about academic struggles. A notable gender difference appears in the use of relaxation techniques such as meditation or mindfulness, where 23 women reported using these methods compared to only 12 men. However, exercise, yoga, or walking was slightly more common among men (12) than women (9). Positive reframing of academic challenges was reported more by men (32) than by women (23). In contrast, writing in a journal, engaging in creative activities, or seeking counselling was used by 15 women and 13 men.

Considering active problem coping strategies, time management and prioritisation were almost equally practised by men (54) and women (51). Dividing coursework into smaller, achievable tasks was more common among women (34) than men (26). Similarly, more women (25) than men (16) reported consulting lecturers, tutors, or peers to enhance their academic understanding. The use of active recall, mind mapping, or group studies was balanced, with 18 men and 19 women indicating this method. Establishing achievable academic targets was reported by 26 men and 24 women, again showing minimal gender difference.

For passive emotional coping strategies, women consistently reported higher usage than men. Watching movies, playing games, or engaging in other entertainment activities was used by 56 women compared to 46 men. Sleeping or resting more was also more common among women (53) than men (43). Eating comfort food followed a similar pattern, with 27 women and 17 men reporting this behaviour. Mental disconnection from academic challenges was reported by both genders in similar proportions: 13 men and 12 women. Ignoring academic conversations to delay stress was slightly more common among women (18) than men (12). Alcohol use as a coping strategy was reported by a small number overall, with 4 men and only 1 woman.

Under passive problem coping strategies, procrastination was significantly more common among women (33) than men (18). Avoiding responsibilities was more frequently reported by men (19) than women (15). Blaming external factors was reported by 23 women and 11 men, showing a noticeable gender difference. Relying on luck or fate showed no gender disparity, with 15 men and 15 women each indicating this strategy. Withdrawing from academic activities was more common among men (20) than women (14).

**Table 5**

Summary of gendered trends

Coping Type	More Used by Men	More Used by Women
Active Emotional	Positive reframing, physical activity	Relaxation, journaling, and mindfulness
Active Problem	Task setting, goal framing	Task division, academic help-seeking
Passive Emotional	Alcohol use, mental disconnection	Comfort food, sleep, and entertainment
Passive Problem	Withdrawal, responsibility avoidance	Procrastination, blame externalisation

(Source: Authors' work)

### Testing hypothesis

An independent samples t-test was conducted to compare the mean stress levels between male and female participants.

Table 6  
Group statistics

	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Mean_Stress	Male	75	3.6080	.67258	.07766
	Female	75	3.8933	.70545	.08146

(Source: Survey data)

The descriptive statistics presented in Table 6 show that the average stress level reported by females (M = 3.8933, SD = 0.70545) was higher than that reported by males (M = 3.6080, SD = 0.67258). Both groups consisted of 75 participants, and the standard deviations were relatively similar, indicating comparable variability in stress scores across the two groups.

Table 7  
Independent samples t-test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	T	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Mean_Stress	Equal variances assumed	.483	.488	-2.535	148	.012	-.28533	.11255	-.50774	-.06293
	Equal variances not assumed.			-2.535	147.664	.012	-.28533	.11255	-.50775	-.06292

(Source: Survey data)

Table 7 demonstrates the results of the independent sample t-test used to test the hypothesis. Before interpreting the t-test results, the assumption of equal variances was assessed using Levene's Test for Equality of Variances. Levene's test result was not statistically significant (F = 0.483, p = 0.488), which suggests that the assumption of equal variances has not been violated. Therefore, the row labelled "Equal variances assumed" is used for interpreting the results of the t-test.

The t-test revealed a statistically significant difference in mean stress levels between males and females,  $t(148) = -2.535$ ,  $p = 0.012$ . This result indicates that the observed difference in stress scores is unlikely to have occurred by chance. The mean difference in stress scores was -0.28533, with a 95% confidence interval ranging from -0.50774 to -0.06293. Since the confidence interval does not include zero, this further confirms that the difference is statistically significant. Therefore, the analysis provides evidence of a significant difference in stress levels between male and female participants. Females reported significantly higher levels of stress than males.

### Discussion

The findings from the data analysis provide a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of academic stress and related coping mechanisms among management undergraduates of the selected university. The mean value analysis of the academic stress items revealed a moderate to high level of stress experienced by students. This finding is consistent with numerous studies that revealed university students are experiencing higher levels of academic stress, especially in the global south context (E.g., Deng et al., 2022; Ebrahim et al., 2024; Koppenborg et al., 2022). The item with the highest mean value indicated that students often feel overwhelmed due to academic demands. This highlights that pressure from coursework, deadlines, and study commitments is a prominent concern for many students. Mir and Roy (2024) found that students experience higher levels of stress due to deadlines because of various factors, not practical knowledge gain, the teaching style of the teacher, the length of the assignment, time allocation, methods used in different programs of study, lack of interest in a course, demotivation, discouragement, and hard courses. According to Cahyadewi et al. (2024), decreased commitment to deadlines and procrastination tendencies can lead to academic burnout.

Many respondents of this study reported emotional distress and difficulty coping with academic responsibilities, showing that stress is not only present but also impacts students' ability to function and perform. Plenty of studies have exposed the effect of stress and anxiety on academic performance (E.g., Ahmad et al., 2022; Li et al., 2024). The physical symptoms of stress, although reported slightly less frequently, were still prevalent. The item on stress impacting motivation and well-being had the lowest mean score, though it still indicated moderate concern. It suggests that while students experience stress, they may find ways to maintain their sense of well-being despite stress (Terrell et al., 2022). The overall mean score of 3.75 further supports the argument that academic stress is a common experience among students in this faculty. Moreover, the relatively low standard deviation implies that the experience of stress is consistent across the sample, rather than being concentrated in subgroups.

Among active emotional coping strategies, both men and women showed a strong tendency to talk to friends, family, or mentors about their academic struggles, with nearly equal frequencies. However, women were more tended to engage in relaxation techniques such as meditation and mindfulness. It suggests that women have a greater reliance on calming and introspective practices (Sharma et al., 2022). Men were more likely to use positive reframing by viewing academic challenges as opportunities for growth. That indicates men's tendency toward cognitive restructuring in managing academic stress (Olorunfemi & Funmilayo, 2022). Slightly more men than women engaged in physical activity like exercise or walking to release emotional tension. Women were marginally more likely to journal, pursue creative endeavours, or seek counselling. Consequently, women exhibit a greater inclination towards expressive coping strategies in comparison to men (Wong & Phillips, 2022).

In terms of active problem coping strategies, both genders placed a high value on time management and prioritisation. Therefore, both men and women use time management as a common strategy to manage their academic demands (Babicka-Wirkus et al., 2021; Joseph et al., 2020). It was discovered that women break up their coursework into smaller, more manageable assignments and seek clarification from peers, instructors, or tutors. This finding demonstrates that women approach problem-solving in a more structured and socially supported manner (Milas et al., 2021). In the meantime, both gender groups employed strategies like creating realistic academic goals and employing active study methods like mind mapping or group projects nearly equally. Men exhibited a somewhat more independent approach (Cronqvist et al., 1997), employing techniques like goal-setting and organised study without necessarily seeking out academic assistance.

Women reported using passive emotional coping strategies more frequently, such as eating comfort food, sleeping or resting more, and watching movies or doing other entertainment-related activities. According to Sunindijo and Kamardeen (2017), these behaviours among women imply that they may tend to temporarily disengage from stressors and seek comfort to cope with the academic stress. Men used leisure and amusement as well. Additionally, men were more likely to report using alcohol as a coping mechanism, albeit to a lesser degree. Alcohol use is a significant gendered risk behaviour, despite being a rare academic coping strategy (Fernandez et al., 2021; Prowse et al., 2021). Furthermore, both men and women frequently avoided academic conversations and mentally disconnected from academics (Salimzadeh et al., 2021). This result illustrates a common tendency to temporarily disengage from academic stress.

When examining passive problem coping strategies, stark gender differences were found. Women were more likely to procrastinate and attribute their academic difficulties to outside causes. This result implies that women have a greater propensity to externalise stress and engage in avoidant behaviours (Efthim et al., 2001; Kassim et al., 2022). On the other hand, men were more likely to avoid responsibilities altogether and to distance themselves from academic pursuits. Equal dependence on fate or luck was reported by men and women, suggesting that some students share this belief in uncontrollable academic outcomes. According to these trends, women are still sufficiently engaged to blame their stress on outside factors, despite being more avoidant (Panayiotou et al., 2017), whereas men are more likely to disengage (Ovsyanik et al., 2022).

As a result, the analysis shows that women typically prefer emotion-focused, socially interactive coping strategies that are both maladaptive and productive (Theodoratou et al., 2023; Thoits, 1991). Communication, asking for help, engaging in structured academic behaviours, and engaging in comfort-seeking activities are characteristics of their coping mechanisms. Men, on the other hand, typically use more individualistic coping strategies, like cognitive reframing, exercise, and avoiding stressful situations (Monnier et al., 1998). Although both groups use a variety of coping mechanisms, women seem to be more socially conscious and emotionally expressive (Thoits, 1991; Wurtz, 2022). Self-reliance (Ishikawa et al., 2022) and disengagement (Ovsyanik et al., 2022) are more common in men. These gendered trends emphasise how crucial it is to modify mental health treatments and academic support services to accommodate men's and women's unique coping mechanisms.

Moreover, this study investigated whether men and women perceive academic stress differently. Accordingly, this advanced hypothesis was accepted. The independent samples t-test revealed that female students reported significantly higher stress levels compared to male students. This difference was statistically significant and unlikely to have occurred by chance. Numerous studies have consistently found that women experience more academic stress than men (E.g., Asensio-Martínez et al., 2023; Graves et al., 2021; Iskandar et al., 2024). This result aligns with the coping patterns observed earlier; greater use of passive emotional coping and a higher tendency toward procrastination and blame among female students may be contributing to their higher reported stress.

## Conclusion

This study examined the gendered dynamics of academic stress and coping strategies among management undergraduates at a selected university in Sri Lanka. The findings indicate that students experience moderate to high levels of academic stress. Accordingly, women reported significantly higher stress levels than men. The stressors for this overwhelming stress include academic workload, deadlines, and performance expectations. Such stressors affect both the emotional well-being and academic functioning of the students. Furthermore, the results showed significant gender differences in coping strategies for academic stress. As per the results, women are more likely to use a greater variety of active and passive emotional strategies, including emotional expression, relaxation techniques, and social support seeking. Furthermore, women continue to report higher levels of stress in addition to using a variety of coping mechanisms. It implies that these methods might not be totally successful in reducing academic stress. Men, on the other hand, are more likely to employ independent strategies like cognitive reframing and exercise, but they also exhibit signs of disengagement and underreport stress.

Moreover, the analysis confirms that gender is a significant determinant of both stress perception and coping behaviour among undergraduates, with female students demonstrating higher vulnerability to academic pressure despite adopting more socially supportive coping methods. This suggests that current stress management practices within universities may inadequately address gender-specific needs, particularly the emotional and relational dimensions of coping used by female students. Hence, the study provides empirical evidence to inform university administrators and policymakers to design tailored mental health interventions, gender-responsive counselling services, and academic workload management programs. By aligning support systems with the coping tendencies identified in this study, higher education institutions can more effectively mitigate academic stress and enhance student well-being and performance.

## Limitations and directions for future Studies

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the use of a convenience sampling method limits the generalizability of the findings, as the sample may not fully represent all management undergraduates in Sri Lankan universities. Second, the reliance on self-reported data may have introduced response bias, as participants could have underreported or exaggerated their stress levels and coping behaviours. Third, the study adopted a cross-sectional design, which restricts the ability to establish causal relationships between gender, academic stress, and coping strategies. Future research could employ longitudinal or mixed-method approaches to capture changes in stress experiences over time and provide deeper qualitative insights into gendered coping mechanisms. Additionally, expanding the study to include students from diverse academic disciplines and institutions would allow for broader comparisons. Investigating the role of personality traits, social support systems, and cultural factors could also enrich understanding of academic stress and coping behaviours.

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