Effect of Gender on Stressful Experiences of First Year Students.

An inside from a public university in Kenya.

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Abstract

The present study examined the effect of gender on stressful experiences of first year students in one selected public university in Kenya. A cross-sectional survey design was adopted to guide data collection. The participants were one hundred and ninety eight first year students (198) at one university. Quantitative data was obtained using Stress Questionnaire. Inferential analysis by use of independent t-test was used to test hypothesis. The findings indicated that there are significant gender differences in stressful experiences on academic demands, psychological and social relationship and financial difficulties among the first year university students. Therefore, this implies that Dean of students at universities should design support mechanisms to support female students in coping with stressors as new students.

Keywords: gender; first year students; stressful experiences; public university.

Introduction

New students transitioning to universities from high school are prone to adjustment challenges in the new learning environment. In an effort to adjust to the transitioning challenges at universities, the first year students are prone to stressful conditions due to various demands in the new environments. Stress results from an individual's encounter with perceived threat to well-being and environment and this upsets the individual affecting mental health (Salam, et al., 2013). Stallman and Hurst (2010) argues that there is positive stress, known as eustress which helps in enhancing success and motivation among student at university. In addition, there is negative stress, known as distress among affects the well-being of students making them prone and at risk of behavioral, psychological, physical health problems, and suicidal ideation. Moreover, Bewick et al., (2010) reiterate that factors such as academic demands, identity changes from adolescence stage to young adulthood, and the urgency to adjust to new learning styles are among factors that expose first year students to stressful experiences at university. Garett, et al., (2017) reiterate that first year students experience stressful conditions which result to negative outcomes namely, inadequate academic adjustment, poor mental health, indulgence in drug and alcohol abuse, low self-esteem, and finally increased depression levels. In addition, Stallman and Hurst (2016)

reiterate that stress among first year students at universities result from high parental expectations, balance of personal and life at university, social relationship issues, inability to practice self-management and finally, challenging academic work load. Thus, first year students who experience stress eventually develop poor mental health and reduced academic achievement. In addition, Karyotaki, et al., (2020) add that students at universities experience numerous stressors including poor time management, financial pressures, poor adaptation to new environments, increased academic work load, and inability to adjust to instructor centered learning styles at universities.

Globally, first year students are prone to stress in their transitioning to universities from secondary schools. In a study by Coughlan (2015) indicate that trends point to increasing stressors for students entering college and universities in the United States of America. Moreover, Cook (2014) reiterate that new students transitioning to universities is compared with a "bubble about to burst" (p. 1). Moreover, other research also indicate that, most new students at universities are stressed and anxious about the expectations on academic performance. The study further indicate that most students are anxious about tests, increased academic demands on assignments, and the need to attain required grades to progress to higher academic years at university (OECD, 2017). In recent years, another research indicate that first year students at universities struggled to adjust, have increased depressive symptoms and anxiety due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Zimmermann, et al., 2020). In a related research, Copeland, et al., (2020) argues that new students face numerous challenges on transitioning to university from secondary school. First year students in Kenya also find themselves in this predicament of stress during transitioning from secondary school. For example, Umija, et al., (2021) argues that students who are orphaned have numerous stressors as a result of irrational beliefs in themselves and conditions. Moreover, Aloka (2022) study in Kenya indicate that gender is a determining factor on adjustment among freshmen, with male students adjusting to the university environment faster and better ways when compared with female students. Most recently, Aloka (2022) reiterate that new students in universities in Kenya face numerous stressors resulting from new academic demands, inability to balance private life and academic life, social relationship issues, indulgence in alcohol and drug abuse.

Selye's Systemic Stress Theory

The Systemic Stress theory was developed and proposed by Hans Selye. According to Selye (1976), stress consists of unspecified induced changes in a biologic system and it manifests in various forms. According to stress theory, stress in an individual proceeds in three stages. First, is the experience of initial shock and a subsequent counter shock phase which is regarded as the alarm reaction stage. In the shock phase, there is evidence of excitement, gastro-intestinal ulcerations and increased adrenaline discharge (Selye, 1976).

The counter shock phase marks the initial operation of defensive processes and is characterized by increased adrenocortical activity. In the stage two, there occurs resistance, there is noxious stimulation in an organism (Selye, 1976). According to Seyle, an organism indication of adaption to stressors occurs when symptoms of the alarm reaction disappear. This progresses to the third stage, in which resistance leads to exhaustion stage when aversive stimulation persists (Selye, 1976). On the other hand, at times the symptoms of this stage reappears in instances when an organism no longer has the capability to adapt to environmental stressors. Therefore, in this regard, an organism might not survive in instances when there is irreversible tissue damage and persistence on stimulation (Selye, 1976). In as much as this theory of stress has been widely applied in educational settings, there are criticisms that are presented against it as well. For example, Mason (1975) pointed out that cognitive mediation is believed to be the main reason for human stress as opposed to physiological stress discussed by Selye in the theory. Despite this weakness, the Seyle's theory of stress is relevant in this study because in explains how the body of an individual reacts to stressors in a new environment. Thus, this theory was relevant because it guided the explanations of gender effects in stressful experiences among first year students at university.

Literature Review

Literature effects of gender on stressful experiences exist, but some were done among students in other years as university. For example, Idowu et al., (2022) study argues that significant gender differences exist on stressful experiences among students because males have lower risk of it as compared to females. Moreover, Hossain et al., (2022) indicate that male students suffer less stress because they have better coping mechanisms as compared to female students who experience severe stress. In Ireland, McLean, et al., (2022) study reported that male students suffer psychological distress more than the female counterparts in the same learning environments. In another research, Gefen and Fish (2012) study indicated that gender differences on stressful experiences are evident among students at university because females experience stressors on social relationships and increased academic demands but on the other hand, male students had psychological distress on finances for upkeep. Moreover, Dafogianni et al., (2022) study reported that female students at university experience more stress and anxiety as a result of environmental challenges as compared to male counterparts. In contrast, Zamani-Alavijeh et al., (2017) found that gender differences exist on stress experiences among students and that male ones exhibit better coping mechanisms as compared to females. Hubbard, et al., (2018) study reported that female students at universities experience stress associated with high expectations on academic performance, leading to poor mental health, while male students are stressed because of financial needs. In addition, Rijal et al., (2023) study reported that male students have better coping mechanisms to stress as compared to

female ones who are susceptible to more environmental stressors. In another study, Elmer, et al., (2020) reported that more female students exhibit stressful experiences due to challenging environmental demands on instructional issues and academic challenges as compared to the male counterparts.

In another research, Gao, et al., (2019) reported that there are significant gender differences in anxiety and stress by students at university, because females experience higher distress as compared to the male counterparts of the same year of study. Moreover, Chowdhury, et al., (2022) study shows that female freshmen are more depressed, stressed and experience poor mental health as compared to the male students at same learning environments at university. Similarly, Yakasai, et al., (2022) show that depressive symptoms, stress and anxiety is more associated with female freshmen as compared to male students who tend to exhibit stronger coping mechanisms to the same. In addition, Graves, et al., (2021) reported that most female students at university suffer psychological distress because of multiple issues that they are expected to do being students, some mothers and expectations on academic tasks. Strom, et al., (2023) reported that male students experience less psychological distress as compared to the female counterparts who face intense social relationship issues among themselves hindering their adjustment at university. Similarly, Haque and Jahan (2023) reported that male and female students experience psychological distress due to challenging finances to meet their demands while at the university. Singh et al., (2022) revealed that significant gender differences exist in stressful experiences among students because most females suffer academic and emotional issues as compared to the male students who tend to exhibit better coping mechanisms. In addition, Dafogianni, et al., (2022) reported that most female students suffer psychological distress due to multiple expectations at university as compared to the male students who are perceived to have better adjustment mechanisms to new environmental challenges. Wright, et al., (2022) reported that gender differences exist on stressful experiences by students at university since most male students report intense stressors as compared to the female students in the same learning environments. In another study, Palička, et al., (2023) reported that most when comparing the subjective experience of stress between genders, women report highest stress level more often than men. On the contrary, Emebigwine, et al., (2023) reported that there are no significant gender differences on stressful experiences among students in higher education institutions.

In Africa, Busari (2012) study carried out in Nigeria indicated that most male students experienced financial stressors, frustrations and self-expectations while pursuing studies at university. In Kenya, Misigo (2015) showed that male and female students reported higher levels of perceived stress than their male peers. In Kenya, Laigong and Simiyu (2021) reiterate that most male students experience high stressors from the adjustment challenges at the university environment as compared to female

counterparts who exhibit low stress levels. Most recently, in Kenya, Mutiso, et al., (2023) study reiterate that most female students suffer psychological distress associated with challenging environmental demands, academic demands and financial difficulties as compared to the male counterparts. On the bases of the context above, there are many fist year students who have adjustment challenges and are thus susceptible to increased stress, poor academic performance, poor eating habits, increased depression levels, and more mood related issues which eventually leads to poor mental health. Moreover, majority of first year students suffer from stress since they are overwhelmed by ever increasing environmental demands at university. Therefore, this study sought to fill in gaps by investigating the effect of gender on stressful experiences of first year students in one selected public university.

Research Hypothesis

The following research hypothesis was tested:

Ho: *There are no significant effect of gender on stressful experiences of first year students in one selected public university*

Methods

Research Design

This cross-sectional survey design was adopted to guide data collection in this research. The cross-sectional survey is a technique that employs a questionnaire to collect data from human participants (Strang, 2015). This research design was appropriate for this study because the research tools comprised questionnaires only and it involved many research participants.

Research Participants

The research participants comprised 198 first year students enrolled in Bachelor of education undergraduate degree programme in one public university in Kenya. Thus, the sample size comprised One hundred and ninety eight sampled first year students (198 students) sampled using simple random sampling technique. Of this sample, 128 (64.6%) comprised male students and 70 (35.4%) female students.

Research Tools

The Stress Questionnaire was used to collect data from first year university students. The first part of the questionnaire measured stress on physical environmental factors. Two of the items on this section include, "*I felt strange and confused when I first came to the university*", and "*My first experience of separation from home was coming to the university for the first time*". The second part measured stress from university

administrative process factors. Two items on this section include, "*I did not like the idea that new students have to look for information on their own instead of being told everything expected of them*", and "*The process of registration we were subjected to was rather long and demanding*". The third part measured stress on academic demands factors. Two items on this section include, "*I found the units I am taking more difficult than I originally thought*", and "*The work load in the degree am pursuing is rather too heavy*". The questionnaire also measured stress on psychological and social relationship factors. Two items on this section include "When I first came to this university, I felt very lonely", and "*I was homesick in my early days at the university*". Finally, the questionnaire also measured stress on financial support/difficulties factors. Two items on this section include "*I had some difficulty getting information about university bursaries*", and "*Although I am having difficulty getting enough money to pay for my fees, i cannot afford living standards of a university student*". Each section of the Stress Questionnaire had 5 items each and on a 5-point Likert scale, *Strongly Agree* (5); *Agree* (4); *Neutral* (3); *Disagree* (2) and *Strongly Disagree* (1). The validity of the Stress Questionnaire was ascertained by expert judgment of lecturers at the selected university.

Procedure

Permission to conduct the study was obtained from the selected public university in Kenya. The Bachelor of Education first year students were assembled in a hall at the university. The participants were assured of anonymity, confidentiality and voluntary participation. Then, the participants signed consent forms after which they were issued with questionnaires to complete. Questionnaires were issued to 198 students who completed them and returned to the researcher after 45 minutes.

Data analysis

Data analysis of quantitative data from questionnaires involved the use of inferential statistics such as independent samples t-test aided to make inferences. The independent t-test was used to ascertain the gender differences in stress among first year students. Statistical tests were used to investigate the relationships and differences between the variables. All tests of significance were computed at $\alpha = 0.05$. The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 26.0 was used to analyze the data.

Results

This study examined the differences in stressful experiences of first year students on the basis of their gender. The study classified gender as male and female of the study respondents. However, stressful experiences considered in five subscales namely; psychological and social relationship factors, university administrative process factors, physical environmental factors, academic demands factors, and financial difficulties

factors. The overall stressful experience was computed by working out the mean ratings in each of the five facets of stressful experience. The effect of gender on stressful experiences was investigated by testing the hypothesis that, there is no statistically significant difference in stressful experiences between male and female among the first year university students. The hypothesis was tested using independent-samples t-test to compare the stressful experiences scores for male and female respondents. Independent-sample t-test was appropriate because the two variables used are gender (Male coded as 1 and Female coded as 2) and stressful experiences, being categorical and continuous, respectively. The scores of dependent variable (stressful experiences) was computed from frequencies of responses by computing mean responses per respondents.

One hundred and ninety eight sampled first year students were included in the study; the sample consisted of 128 (64.6%) male students and 70 (35.4%) female students. Table 1 presents the summary of the results of independent-sample t-test analysis investigating the effect of gender on stressful experiences among the first year university students.

Stressful Experience	**Mode of Study**	**N**	**Mean**	***SD***	**SEM**	***t*-value**	**Sig. level**	**Effect Size**
Physical Environmental	Male	128	2.70	0.75	0.07	.298	.766 (ns)	0.056
	Female	70	2.74	0.69	0.08			
University Administrative Process	Male	128	2.43	0.68	0.06	1.063	.289 (ns)	.157
	Female	70	2.54	0.72	0.09			
Academic Demands	Male	128	3.40	0.88	0.08	2.709	.007	.389
	Female	70	3.71	0.70	0.08			
Psychological and Social Relationship	Male	128	3.06	0.93	0.08	2.932	.004	.438
	Female	70	3.47	0.94	0.11			
Financial Difficulties	Male	128	2.54	0.80	0.07	3.202	.002	.1.518
	Female	70	2.94	0.93	0.11			
Overall Stressful experiences	Male	128	2.85	0.53	0.05	2.585	.010	.842
	Female	70	3.04	0.49	0.06			

Table 1: Gender on stressful experience levels of first year university students
Source: SPSS Output on Survey Data (2022)

It is shown from the results in Table 1 that even though the female students had statistically significant [*t* (196) = 2.585, *p* =.010] higher mean (*M*=3.04; *SD*=0.49) in overall stressful experiences level than their male counterparts (*M*=2.85; *SD*=0.53), the difference between the level of their stressful experiences was significant in only three out of the five subscales of stressful experiences. None significant differences between gender in stressful experiences were noted in physical environmental and university administrative process. For instance, while female students recorded higher stress levels (*M*=2.74; *SD*=0.69) than the male students (*M*=2.70; *SD*=0.75) in physical environment allied matters, the difference was not statistically significant [*t* (196) =.298, *p* =.766]. This shows that gender accounted for an inconsequential effect on stressful experiences with regard to physical environment, as further reflected by a small effect size (Cohen's *d*=.056). In the same way, the results of the survey reveal that there was no significant difference in stressful experience attributed to university administrative process between male and female first year university students [*t* (196) = 1.063, *p* =.289]. Suffice, the magnitude of the difference in the means was small (Cohen's *d*=.157), suggesting that there is negligible variance in stress levels attributed to university administrative process stressful experiences among the first year university students explained by the student gender.

On the other hand, the results of this study has established that there is a statistically significant difference between the mean stress levels of male and female students in academic demands, psychological and social relationship and financial difficulties among the first year university students. Specifically, female students had a higher mean of stressful experience in academic demands (*M*=3.71; *SD*=0.74) than the male students (*M*=3.40, *SD*=0.88). An independent sample t-test revealed a t-statistic of 2.709, with *df* = 196 (*p* =.007) and a moderate effect size as signified by Cohen's *d* value of 0.389. This further confirms a significant difference in academic demand stressful experience between the female and male first year university students. Similarly, with regards to psychological and social relationship, the female students had a higher mean stress levels (*M*=3.47, *SD*=0.94) than the male students (*M*=3.06, *SD*=0.93), with an independent sample t-test results having a t-statistic value of 2.932 at *df* =196 (*p* =0.004). Thus, the difference was statistically significant (*p* =.004 <.05) and had a sizeable effect size, as reflected by a Cohen's *d* value of 0.438. Equally, an independent-samples t-test results indicate that scores on financial difficulties stressful experience levels were significantly higher for female students (*M* = 2.94, *SD* = 0.93) than for male students (*M* = 2.54, *SD* = 0.80), *t*(196) = 3.202, *p* =.002, Cohen's *d* =.842.

Discussion

The study reported that the scores on total stressful experience levels were significantly higher for female students than for male students. The female students' stressful

experience was largely drawn from their academic demands, psychological and social relationship and financial difficulties, where they recorded significantly higher stress ratings than their male counterparts. In agreement, Yakasai, et al., (2022) show that depressive symptoms, stress and anxiety is more associated with female freshmen as compared to male students who tend to exhibit stronger coping mechanisms to the same. Moreover, Graves, et al., (2021) reported that most female students at university suffer psychological distress because of multiple issues that they are expected to do being students, some mothers and expectations on academic tasks. Moreover, Strom, et al., (2023) reported that male students experience less psychological distress as compared to the female counterparts who face intense social relationship issues among themselves hindering their adjustment at university. Similarly, Haque and Jahan (2023) reported that male and female students experience psychological distress due to challenging finances to meet their demands while at the university.

However, the findings indicated that gender has no significant influence on stressful experiences related to physical environmental and university administrative process among the first year university students. In contrary, Dafogianni, et al., (2022) reported that most female students suffer psychological distress due to multiple expectations at university as compared to the male students who are perceived to have better adjustment mechanisms to new environmental challenges. Moreover, Wright, et al., (2022) reported that gender differences exist on stressful experiences by students at university since most male students report intense stressors as compared to the female students in the same learning environments. In another study, Palička, et al., (2023) reported that most when comparing the subjective experience of stress between genders, women report highest stress level more often than men. On the contrary, Emebigwine, et al., (2023) reported that there are no significant gender differences on stressful experiences among students in higher education institutions. In another study, Mutiso, et al., (2023) study reiterate that most female students suffer psychological distress associated with challenging environmental demands, academic demands and financial difficulties as compared to the male counterparts. Similarly, Hossain et al., (2022) indicate that male students suffer less stress because they have better coping mechanisms as compared to female students who experience severe stress. Finally, McLean, et al., (2022) study reported that male students suffer psychological distress more than the female counterparts in the same learning environments.

Conclusion & Recommendation

Consequently, the study concludes that there is significant difference in academic demands, psychological and social relationship and financial difficulties between male and female first year university students. Thus, the study concludes that there

is significant difference in stressful experiences between the male and female first year university students, with female students generally being more stressed than their male counterparts. The study recommends that Dean of students at universities should design support mechanisms to support female students in coping with stressors as new students. Moreover, parents should provide support to first year students at universities to assist them cope with challenges of transition to higher education institutions.

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Effect of Gender on Stressful Experiences of First Year Students.
An inside from a public university in Kenya.
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Presented: May 2023
Included for Publishing: June 2023
Published: July 2023 , Volume 14, Issue 28 Academicus International Scientific Journal