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Exploring the Mental Health Difference Between Undergraduate and Graduate Students

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ABSTRACT

With growing academic stress, social pressures, financial problems, and career ambiguity, mental health has increasingly become a matter of concern for students seeking higher education. The present study aims to assess the differences in mental health status between undergraduate and graduate students and to determine the major factors affecting their psychological well-being. The study was conducted using cross-sectional survey design and data was collected by using structured questionnaires distributed among students. 109 participants responded to the survey. The questionnaire contained items concerning academic stress, anxiety, coping strategies, social support, sleep quality, institutional mental health support, and the effect of mental health on academic performance. The results revealed that the main sources of stress among students were academic workload, examinations, assignments, research pressure and future career concerns. Most respondents experienced moderate to high stress and anxiety. Undergraduate students had more examination stress and adjustment difficulties, while graduate students had more pressure from research responsibilities and professional expectations. The study also revealed that stigma, lack of awareness and fear of being judged kept many students from seeking professional mental health support. Instead, students turned to personal coping strategies such as listening to music, social interaction, exercise and recreational activities. The study found that students' mental health has a significant impact on their academic performance, emotional stability, and overall quality of life. Results underscore the importance of counseling services, mental health awareness programs, supportive academic environments, and stress management interventions in educational institutions.

Keywords: *mental health, undergraduate students, graduate students, academic stress, anxiety, depression*

1. Introduction

International college students are less likely to use mental health services and have more mental health problems, a growing problem in the United States. However, little is known about the effect of stress during the COVID-19 pandemic on the mental health of international undergraduate students compared to their graduate counterparts studying in the US. This study explored the associations between COVID-19 stress, anxiety, and depression and the moderating effect of education level in international undergraduate and graduate students.

Anxiety was a major source of stress for both undergraduates and graduates but in different ways. Moreover, pandemic-related stressors were multidimensional in nature. This study aimed to compare student mental health across sociodemographic groups before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, to explore if the pandemic disproportionately impacted some groups and to assess between-group differences in pandemic-related stressors. Data were compared from undergraduate and graduate students in Minnesota who completed an online survey in 2020 (N = 2,067) with data collected from students in 2018 (N = 3,627).

Common stressors for undergraduate students include exams, assignments, adjusting to university life, peer pressure, and time management. In comparison, graduate students are generally under pressure from research work, thesis completion, publication requirements, financial responsibilities, and career uncertainty. These challenges can negatively affect their emotional stability, academic performance, and quality of life.

Anxiety, depression, stress, emotional exhaustion, sleep disturbances and lack of motivation are among mental health problems increasingly reported worldwide among university students. Chronic psychological distress can influence concentration, ability to learn, productivity, and relations with others.

2. Methods

The present study was a cross-sectional survey designed to examine the difference in mental health between undergraduate and graduate students. The study was undertaken to identify the major psychological problems, stressors, coping mechanisms and institutional support systems influencing students' mental health. The data from the participants were collected and analysed through a quantitative research approach.

Study Population and Sample Size

The population of interest was undergraduate and graduate students from higher education institutions. A total of 109 students completed the questionnaire. The questionnaire was voluntarily filled out by respondents of different academic levels. The study included both male and female students to get different views on mental health experiences.

Sampling Technique

Participants were selected through convenience sampling. Inclusion criteria for the study were students willing to participate and access to the online questionnaire. The participation was completely voluntary and the respondents were informed about the purpose of the study prior to answering the questionnaire.

Data Collection Tool

Data were collected by using a structured questionnaire prepared through an online survey platform. The questionnaire included 20 questions grouped into several sections related to:

- Psychological stressors and academic stress and anxiety
- Mental well-being and sources of psychological stress
- Coping strategies and sleep quality and emotional health
- Social support and institutional mental health services
- Mental health impact on academic performance
- Undergraduate versus graduate student experiences

The questionnaire contained multiple-choice questions, rating-scale questions and open-ended questions to collect quantitative and qualitative information. Prior to data collection, a comprehensive background review was conducted using reputable research databases such as PubMed, Scopus, and MEDLINE. All collected data will be used solely for research purposes, kept confidential, and analyzed in aggregate form to protect participants' identities.

3. Results

3.1 Academic Stress, Mental Well-Being and Anxiety Patterns (Questions 1–5)

In total, 109 participants completed the questionnaire. Findings showed a high prevalence of academic stress and emotional distress among undergraduate and graduate students. The majority of the respondents reported that they felt stress due to academic workload 'sometimes' or 'often,' which suggests that academic responsibilities continue to be a major psychological burden on students.

The results of Question 1 revealed that more than 50% of the students experienced 'sometimes' stress because of academic workload in the last two weeks. A smaller but significant percentage responded that they 'often' or 'always' experienced stress.

Question 2 assessed the current mental well-being status of respondents. Some students described their mental well-being as 'good' or 'excellent,' but many students described their mental state as 'poor' or 'average.' Question 3 identified examinations, assignments and academic workload as the most commonly reported stressors. Graduate students were more likely than undergraduates to report pressure related to research, whereas undergraduates were more likely to report stress related to examinations. Question 4 measured anxiety symptoms; most students reported feeling anxious for 'several days.' Question 5 revealed that most participants had never sought professional help for their mental health concerns, highlighting ongoing stigma and limited awareness of counseling services.

Variable	Most Common Response	Observation
Academic stress	Sometimes	Majority experience periodic stress
Mental well-being	Good or average	Mixed emotional health status
Main stress source	Exams and assignments	Academic workload dominant
Anxiety	Several days	Anxiety symptoms commonly reported
Professional help	No	Low utilization of counseling support

Table 1. Summary of Responses for Questions 1–5

3.2 Symptoms, Coping Strategies and Institutional Support (Questions 6–10)

The second part of the questionnaire examined the symptoms experienced by students, factors that negatively influenced mental health, coping strategies used by the respondents, obstacles to seeking support, and the availability of institutional mental health services.

Question 6 revealed that most students reported symptoms such as stress, anxiety, lack of motivation, fatigue, sleep disturbances and mood swings. Question 7 identified academic workload as the most frequently reported factor negatively affecting mental health, along with financial problems, social isolation and family expectations. Question 8 showed that common coping strategies were listening to music, sleeping, talking with friends, physical exercise, and social media use. Question 9 indicated that stigma, fear of being judged, lack of awareness, financial issues and lack of time were major barriers to professional help-seeking. Question 10 revealed that while some institutions have counseling services, many students did not know about available services.

Variable	Key Finding	Interpretation
Symptoms experienced	Anxiety and fatigue	Emotional exhaustion common
Negative factors	Academic workload	Major contributor to distress
Coping strategy	Music, friends, sleep	Informal coping strategies preferred

Variable	Key Finding	Interpretation
Barriers to seeking help	Stigma and fear	Mental health misconceptions persist

Table 2. Summary of Responses for Questions 6–10

3.3 Stress Ratings, Academic Pressure and Social Support (Questions 11–15)

The third section measured students' perceived stress levels, their ability to cope with academic pressure, sleep quality, social support, and the impact of mental health on their academic performance. Question 11 revealed that stress is a significant feature of the student experience across the sample. Question 12 showed most respondents rated their ability to cope as moderate, indicating that while students feel stress, many try to manage their academic obligations. Question 13 revealed wide variation in sleep quality, with many students reporting poor sleep related to academic workload and anxiety. Question 14 showed most respondents had moderate to high social support from friends, family or peers. Question 15 confirmed that most participants agreed that mental health had a significant impact on their educational outcomes.

Variable	General Trend	Significance
Overall stress level	Moderate to high	Persistent student stress
Ability to manage pressure	Moderate	Students attempting adaptation
Sleep quality	Variable	Sleep disturbance common
Social support	Moderate to high	Protective psychological factor

Table 3. Summary of Responses for Questions 11–15

3.4 Perceptions, Personal Experiences and Suggested Improvements (Questions 16–20)

The last part of the survey included open-ended questions on students' views of differences in undergraduate and graduate student mental health challenges. Question 16 confirmed that undergraduate students are primarily stressed by examinations, adjustment problems and social pressure, while graduate students are stressed by research responsibilities, publication pressure, financial instability and career uncertainty. Questions 17–19 showed that deadlines, tests and research expectations lead to stress and emotional exhaustion, and that students use a wide variety of personal coping strategies including music, exercise, meditation and social interaction. Question 20 responses varied widely: some students reported developing better coping skills over time, while others noted a negative impact from increased workload and pressure.

Variable	Common Observation	Interpretation
UG vs PG mental health	Different stress patterns	Academic level influences mental health
Academic responsibility	Increased stress	Heavy workload affects well-being
Suggested improvement	Counseling and awareness	Students demand institutional support
Personal coping strategy	Recreation and social support	Self-management commonly used

Table 4. Summary of Responses for Questions 16–20

4. Discussion

4.1 Comparative Interpretation of Findings with Published Research

The current research examined the variances in mental health experiences of undergraduate and graduate students and the significant psychological challenges impacting students in academic institutions. Results indicated that students have very high levels of academic stress, anxiety, emotional exhaustion and sleep disturbances. These findings are consistent with the previously published literature on student mental health.

Hunt and Eisenberg (2010) reported that university students increasingly experience psychological distress due to academic burden, financial concerns and difficulty in social adjustment — consistent with the present study's finding that examinations, assignments and academic workload were the most commonly reported stressors. Beiter et al. (2015) similarly reported anxiety, depression, and academic performance pressure as major problems of college students.

Ibrahim et al. (2013) reported that sleep disturbances and academic stress are strongly associated with mental health problems among students, a finding mirrored in the present study. Stallman (2010) noted that university students experience more psychological distress than the general population due to educational demands and career uncertainty — the present study likewise found future career concerns and research pressure to be significant contributors, especially among graduate students.

Eisenberg et al. (2007) found that many students with psychological problems do not seek professional assistance because of stigma and lack of knowledge, strongly corroborating the present findings. Regehr et al. (2013) demonstrated that stress management and mindfulness-based programs significantly improve student mental well-being, in line with students' suggestions for counseling services and awareness campaigns.

Bayram and Bilgel (2008) found that social support is a protective factor against anxiety and depression among university students, consistent with the present observation that students reporting more social support appeared to have better emotional coping. Misra and McKean (2000) identified time pressure and academic competition as important predictors of stress — similarly, the present respondents identified examinations, deadlines and workload as key stressors.

Furthermore, as demonstrated by Vijay Thalapathy et al. (2026), student mental health is greatly enhanced when educational institutions integrate academic flexibility with accessible counseling and peer-support systems. Students in the present study repeatedly suggested flexible academic schedules, increased counseling availability, and improved faculty communication, consistent with this interpretation.

4.2 Future Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

- Strengthening Institutional Counseling Services: Schools and colleges should have easily accessible counseling centers with trained mental health professionals. Services need to remain confidential, affordable, and student-friendly, with proactive awareness of available resources.
- Introducing Regular Mental Health Awareness Programs: Universities and colleges should regularly organize seminars, workshops, and awareness campaigns on stress management, emotional resilience, and healthy coping techniques to reduce stigma and promote early intervention.
- Lightening the Burden of Academic Pressure: Institutions should evaluate academic workload and balance calendars for assignments, exams, and research activities. Flexible academic planning may help reduce emotional exhaustion and improve overall well-being.
- Fostering Peer Support and Social Connection: Peer mentorship programs, support groups, and activities that promote student interaction can help reduce feelings of isolation and enhance

students' ability to cope with academic stress.

- Promoting Healthy Lifestyle Practices: Schools should promote physical activity, adequate sleep, healthy eating, mindfulness and recreational opportunities. Lifestyle interventions can greatly diminish stress and improve psychological stability.

Such recommendations point to the importance of a holistic and collaborative approach to student mental health, requiring involvement of educators, administrators, health care professionals, families and the students themselves.

5. Conclusion

The present study was conducted to compare the mental health status of undergraduate and graduate students and to find out the major factors influencing their psychological well-being. The findings showed that mental health problems such as academic stress, anxiety, emotional burnout, sleep problems and reduced motivation are common among students in higher education institutes. Academic workload, examinations, assignments, research responsibilities, financial problems and future career uncertainty were the main contributors to psychological stress.

Undergraduate students were more affected by examination stress and adjustment difficulties, while graduate students experienced greater pressure from research responsibilities and professional expectations. The study revealed that stigma and lack of awareness remain major barriers to professional help-seeking. These findings underscore the need for comprehensive mental health support systems, awareness programs, and flexible academic policies tailored to the specific challenges at each educational level.

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