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SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW: ACADEMIC STRESS FACTORS AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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Abstract

Academic stress is defined as an unpleasant psychological situation due to pressure obtained from the education system, exams, or high academic expectations by family or oneself. The factors that cause academic stress vary widely, so holistic research is needed to identify the factors. This study aims to identify the factors affecting academic stress. This study is a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) of 12 selected articles from electronic databases such as ScienceDirect by Elsevier, Google Scholar, and PubMed. Studies were selected based on specific inclusion criteria, focusing on peer-reviewed articles published within the last five years that examined emotional and environmental determinants of stress. These articles were obtained through a multi-stage screening process based on the PRISMA 2020 guidelines. The findings

show that academic stress in college students is linked with several factors, including emotional intelligence, emotional regulation, social support, the educational environment, parental expectations, and family involvement. The implications of these findings suggest that academic institutions and counselors should establish targeted workshops and supportive sharing platforms within campus services to mitigate student academic pressure.

Keywords:

Academic Stress, Emotional Intelligence, University Students, Systematic Review

1. Introduction

Academic stress is defined as an unpleasant psychological situation due to pressure obtained in the education system, exams, and high academic expectations by family and self (Çınar-Tanrıverdi & Karabacak-Çelik, 2023). According to Lu'luuzzahro et al. (2025), academic stress among university students occurs when intense academic and personal pressures overwhelm their ability to cope. On a personal level, students often struggle with heavy workloads, financial constraints, and difficult relationships with both peers and lecturers. These challenges are frequently worsened by campus level issues like overcrowded classrooms and a lack of learning resources. When these pressures build up, students easily become disoriented and disorganized. Ultimately, the constant demand to perform well under tight deadlines leads to severe academic strain and subsequent health problems.

The prevalence of stress levels varies greatly depending on the university environment and the research instrument. The prevalence of academic stress levels at King Khalid University reached 12.7% (Awadalla et al., 2021). Research in 2022-2023 on 500 university students in Indonesia found that 39.2% of students had high stress levels, 46% of students had moderate stress levels, and 14.8% of students had low stress levels (Putra & Ardi, 2024). Factors causing academic stress vary widely. The results of research in the United States show that 87% of sources of stress in college students are caused by academic stress. This is related to extensive academics, learning substance, time management, class competition, family pressure, and difficulty adapting to the lecture environment (Barbayannis et al., 2022). Another study states that 63% of students feel anxious before exam time. Academic stress that occurs in the educational environment generally occurs most often before the exam period. The results of

research on 2,456 students showed a negative effect of academic stress on critical thinking skills and academic performance (Al-Shahrani et al., 2023).

High stress levels can severely compromise student health, manifesting in conditions such as depression, chronic fatigue, poor sleep quality, daytime somnolence, and heightened anxiety. Prolonged exposure to such stress may even trigger critical systemic illnesses, including strokes, renal disease, and cardiovascular failures. Nevertheless, individual perceptions of and responses to stress vary significantly (Al-Shahrani et al., 2023). Educational literature consistently confirms that elevated stress is positively correlated with adverse outcomes, including physical and psychological disorders, behavioral issues, academic underperformance, and increased dropout rates (Khorasani et al., 2023).

Academic stress often triggers a mix of physical and mental issues, which generally fall into four main categories. First, it causes physical reactions to pressure, like shaking, cold sweats, dizziness, a racing heart, shallow breathing, nausea, and just feeling weak. On an emotional level, students might deal with constant anxiety, mood swings, irritation, sadness, nervousness, or unnecessary guilt. Stress also messes with a person's head cognitively, making it hard to concentrate or make decisions, causing forgetfulness, and filling their mind with worst-case scenarios and fear of judgment. Finally, it changes how students behave, often leading them to isolate themselves, skip classes, put off schoolwork, avoid their professors, and struggle with everyday social relationships (Attia et al., 2022).

To examine the sources of academic stress, this study adopts the Person-Environment Fit (P-E Fit) perspective, following the educational framework used by Aldridge et al. (2024). This theory explains that academic stress occurs when there is a mismatch between the student and their environment. While several systematic reviews have already investigated student distress, most existing literature focuses broadly on the overall prevalence of stress or evaluates general clinical interventions, leaving a clear gap in systematically isolating the exact triggers. This systematic literature review (SLR) fills this gap by focusing strictly on mapping of personal and environment factors based on empirical evidence from the last five years. Within this model, personal factors represent personal capabilities and emotion regulation, while environment factors cover university level pressures like heavy workloads, rigid semester systems, difficult relationships on campus, financial constraints, and family issues. This clear separation of

personal and environment factors distinguishes this review from past work and highlights what drives student stress.

To guide this systematic review, the research question was developed using the PEO framework, using university students as the population, personal and environment factors as the exposure, and academic stress as the outcome. Academic stress factors are operationally defined as the specific personal characteristics and environmental conditions that share a statistical relationship with psychological strain. Accordingly, this study addresses the following structured research question: What are the personal and environmental factors that show a significant correlation and a clear direction of relationship with academic stress among university students?

2. Research Method

This study uses a systematic review method based on the PRISMA guidelines in 2020. The literature criteria used were in the form of scopus indexed credible scientific journals with a comprehensive search of 3 databases ScinceDirect, Google Scholar, and Pubmed starting from March 13, 2025 to March 17, 2025 and found 12 scientific journals that met the criteria.

2.1. Search Strategy

The search strategy carried out in this study begins with the identification of scientific journals published in the last five years and published in electronic databases such as ScienceDirect by Elsvier, Google Scholar, and PubMed. Google Scholar was utilized strictly as a supplementary database to minimize the risk of missing relevant academic publications. This cautious approach was applied because Google Scholar lacks advanced boolean filtering and is prone to retrieving non-peer-reviewed content, making it less suitable as a primary engine for strict systematic reviews. In addition, manual searches were also conducted to obtain relevant information. To ensure the methodology is fully reproducible, the exact search strings used were as follows:

1. Initial phase: The board search string "factors of stress academic in university student" was applied, found as many as 1,061 journals across the selected databases.
2. Refinement phase: The search string was further optimized adding the keyword "Relationship", which narrowed the results down to 307 journals for initial screening.

2.2. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

To establish a consistent screening boundary, explicit inclusion and exclusion criteria were defined prior to the literature search. The specific inclusion and exclusion criteria applied during the screening process are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: *Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria*

Criteria	Description
Inclusion	1. Scopus indexed international journals published in 2021-2025 2. The study design is quantitative, preferably descriptive correlation and cross-sectional 3. Journals or articles are available with full text 4. The article comes from a reliable source
Exclusion	1. Papers, research reports, and other non-peer-reviewed publications 2. Qualitative studies, systematic reviews and meta-analyses 3. Articles were not written in English 4. The article comes from an unreliable source

2.3. Search Strategy Article Selection

Article selection was conducted independently by the authors by *screening* 307 journals based on abstracts until 40 journals were selected. The next step was a full-text *critical appraisal* of 23 articles until 12 articles were obtained that met the selection criteria for further *review* in this article. The flow of article search is presented in Figure 1.

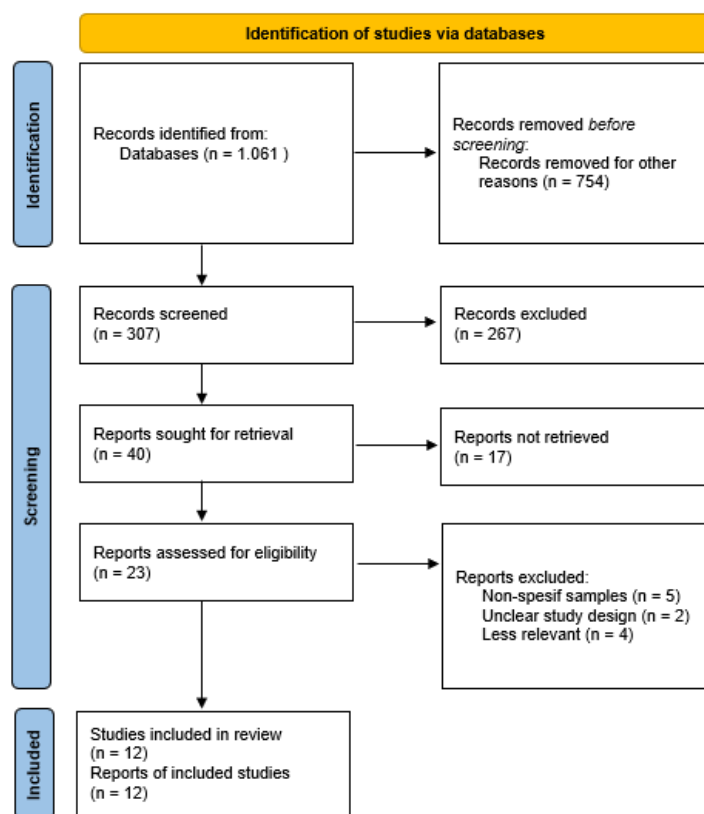


Fig 1: *Systematic Literature Review Diagram Using the PRISMA Model*

Initially, 1,061 records were identified through database searches. After applying keyword optimization, 754 records were removed for other specific reasons, leaving 307 records for screening. Title and abstract screening resulted in the exclusion of 267 irrelevant articles, leaving 40 reports to be sought for retrieval. Among these, 17 reports could not be retrieved due to access limitations. The remaining 23 full-text reports were rigorously assessed for eligibility, leading to the exclusion of 11 reports due to non-specific samples, unclear study design, and less relevant outcomes. The final inclusion phase determined that 12 distinct studies eligible to fulfill the inclusion criteria.

3. Research Results

The selected literature reveals that academic stress among university students is driven by personal and environment factors. The statistical data highlights that academic stress correlates with social support, emotion regulation, emotional intelligence, family involvement,

and the immediate educational environment. A summary of the research variables is presented in Tables 2 and 3.

Table 2: Article Identity

No.	Author Name (Year of Publication)	Article Title	n	Research Design	Location
1.	Zheng <i>et al.</i> (2023)	The Association Between Academic Stress and Test Anxiety in College Students: The Mediating Role of Regulatory Emotional Self Efficacy and the Moderating Role of Parental Expectations	1,315	Descriptive Correlation	Sichuan, China
2.	Shengyao <i>et al.</i> (2024)	Academic resilience, self-efficacy, and motivation: the role of parenting style	405	Descriptive Correlation	China
3.	Jamlu (2025)	Relationship among Academic Stress, Motivation, and Academic Achievement of Diploma Students in College of Arabic and Islamic Studies Ilorin, Nigeria	313	Descriptive Correlation	Nigeria
4.	Cinar-Tanriverdi & Karabacak-Celik (2023)	Psychological Need Satisfaction and Academic Stress in College Students: Mediator Role of Grit and Academic Self Efficacy	967	Descriptive Correlation	Turkey
5.	Merlin Joseph & Sudhesh N. T.	Academic Stress, Social Support, and Adjustment	200	Descriptive Correlation	India

	(2023)	Among International Students in India			
6.	Ullah et al. (2023)	Social Support: Mediating The Emotional Intelligence-Academic Stress Link	429	Cross Sectional	Bangladesh
7.	McEown et al. (2024)	The Role of Trait Emotional Intelligence in Predicting Academic Stress, burnout, and angagement in Japanese Second Language Learners	184	Descriptive Correlation	Japan
8.	Al-Shahrani et al. (2023)	The Prevalence and Associated Factors of Academic Stress among Medical Students of King Khalid University: An Analytical CrossSectional Study	422	Cross Sectional	Saudi Arabia
9.	Khorasani et al. (2023)	The Influence of Emotional Intelligence on Academic Stress Among Medical Students in Neyshabur, Iran	200	Descriptive and Quasi Experimental	Iran
10.	Ibrahim et al. (2024)	The Mediating Effect of Digital Literacy and Self-Regulation on the Relationship Between Emotional Intelligence and Academic Stress among University Students: A Cross-Sectional Study	210	Cross Sectional	Arab Emirates
11.	De la Fuente et al.	Effects of Self-Regulation vs	527	Descriptive	Spain

	(2024)	External Regulation on The Factors and Symptoms of Academic Stress in Undergraduate Students		Correlation	
12	Fakapulua et al. (2023)	Social Factors are Associated with Academic Stress in Pasifika Students at The University of Otago	101	Cross Sectional	New Zealand

Table 3: Distribution of Variable

Assessment Criteria	Zheng <i>et al.</i> (2023)	Shengyao et al. (2024)	Jamalu (2025)	Çınar-Tanrıverdi & Karabacak-Çelik, (2023)	Merlin Joseph & Sudhesh N.T. (2023)	Ullah <i>et al.</i> (2023)	McEown <i>et al.</i> (2024)	Al-Shahrani <i>et al.</i> , (2023)	Khorasani <i>et al.</i> , (2023)	Ibrahim <i>et al.</i> (2024)	de la Fuente <i>et al.</i> (2021)	Fakapulua <i>et al.</i> (2023)
Family expectation	√											
Emotion regulation	√					√				√		√
Self-efficacy	√	√		√								
Teaching process											√	
Learning process						√					√	
Grit				√								
Autonomy				√								
Competence				√								
Relatedness				√								
Social Support					√	√		√				√
Academic motivation		√	√		√							
Self-management									√			
Self-awareness									√			
Relationship management									√			
Emotional Intellegent						√	√			√		
Digital literacy										√		
Avoidance behaviour												√

Parenting style		√										
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Tables 2 and 3 show that out of 12 articles, 7 articles used descriptive correlation research design, 4 articles used cross-sectional research design, and 1 other study used descriptive experimental quasi which focused on factors associated with the occurrence of academic stress. Based on the table above, it can be grouped into several variables, with the largest variables related to social support, emotion regulation, emotional intelligence, family involvement, and educational environment. This distribution indicates that student academic stress is multifaceted, driven by personal traits and environmental pressures.

Table 4: *Extraction of Research Data*

Catagory	Variable	r	p-value	Significance	Correlation Direction
Emotion regulation	Emotion regulation (Zheng <i>et al.</i> , 2023; Ullah <i>et al.</i> , 2023; Ibrahim <i>et al.</i> , 2024; Fakapulua <i>et al.</i> , 2023)	-0,26 s/d 0,49	<0,05	Significant	Emotion regulation decreases, academic stress increases, but can also apply emotion regulation decreases, academic stress increases
Sosial support	Social support (Merlin Joseph & Sudhesh N.T., 2023; Ullah <i>et al.</i> , 2023; Fakapulua <i>et al.</i> , 2023; Al-Shahrani <i>et al.</i> , 2023)	-0,254 s/d 0,126	<0,05	Significant	Social support decreases, academic stress increases. But it can also apply social support decreases, academic stress decreases
Emotional Intelligence	Self efficacy (Zheng <i>et al.</i> , 2023;, Shengyao <i>et al.</i> , 2024; Çınar-Tanrıverdi & Karabacak-Çelik, 2023)	-0.44 s/d -0,37	<0,05	Significant	Self efficacy decreases, academic stress increases

Autonomy (Çınar-Tanrıverdi & Karabacak-Çelik, 2023)	-0,48	<0,05	Significant	Autonomy decreases, academic stress increases
Grit (Çınar-Tanrıverdi & Karabacak-Çelik, 2023)	-0,37	<0,05	Significant	Grit decreased, academic stress increased
Competence (Çınar-Tanrıverdi & Karabacak-Çelik, 2023)	-0,41	<0,05	Significant	Competence decreases, academic stress increases
Relatedness (Çınar-Tanrıverdi & Karabacak-Çelik, 2023)	-0,31	<0,05	Significant	Relatedness decreased, academic stress increased
Academic motivation (Merlin Joseph & Sudhesh N.T., 2023)	-0,021	<0,05	Significant	Academic motivation decreases, academic stress increases
Self-management (Khorasani <i>et al.</i> , 2023)	-	<0,05	Significant	-
Self-awareness (Khorasani <i>et al.</i> , 2023)	-	<0,05	Significant	-
Relationship management (Khorasani <i>et al.</i> , 2023)	-	<0,05	Significant	-
Emotional Intellegent McEown <i>et al.</i> ,2024; Ullah <i>et al.</i> ,2023; Ibrahim <i>et al.</i> ,2024)	-0,523	<0,05	Significant	Emotional intelligence increases, academic stress levels decrease
Avoidance behaviour (Fakapulua <i>et</i>	0.320	<0,05	Significant	Avoidance behavior increases,

	<i>al.</i> , 2023)				academic stress increases
Family involvement	Parental expectation (Zheng <i>et al.</i> , 2023)	-0,07	>0,05	Not significant	Family expectations decreased, academic stress increased
	Parenting style Shengyao <i>et al.</i> , 2024)	0,369	<0,05	Significant	Family expectations decreased, academic stress increased
Educational environment	Teaching process (de la Fuente <i>et al.</i> , 2021)	-0,304	<0,05	Significant	Teaching process decreases, academic stress increases
	Learning process (de la Fuente <i>et al.</i> , 2021; Ullah <i>et al.</i> , 2023)	-0,200	<0,05	Significant	Learning process decreases, academic stress increases
	Digital literacy (Ibrahim <i>et al.</i> , 2024)	0,779	<0,05	Significant	Digital literacy increases, academic stress increases

In table 4, almost all analyzed variables demonstrate a statistically significant relationship with academic stress ($p < 0.05$), with the sole exception of parental expectations ($p > 0.05$). Based on the data extraction of the 12 selected journals, the identified variables are systematically categorized into two core dimensions: personal factors (which include emotional regulation, emotional intelligence, and self-constructs) and environmental factors (which encompass social support, family involvement, and the educational environment).

4. Discussion

The reviewed studies rely on different research designs, which include 7 descriptive correlation studies, 4 cross sectional studies, and 1 quasi experimental study. The majority of the journals obtained were from China and other Asian continental groups such as Turkey, India, Bangladesh, Japan, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and the Arab Emirates. The sample range used in these journals is between 101-1.315 respondents. Instead of comparing the absolute statistical weights

across different studies, this discussion focuses on the shared direction of the correlations and the overall strength of evidence reported in the literature. Discussion of academic stress factors with the systematic review method has not been found much, besides that this study takes a critical approach in evaluating the reference journals used. Data collection is carried out thoroughly and comprehensively so that the literature used is of good quality and credible to be discussed further in this study. This is an advantage of this research. The limitation of this study is the difficulty of obtaining journals that match the required keywords so that the number of journals available is relatively limited.

The literature demonstrates that personal variables such as emotional intelligence and emotion regulation have a significant negative correlation with stress levels. Under the P-E Fit model, these internal psychological traits represent the personal resources that students bring to their environment. Emotional intelligence has an important role in managing stress levels, such as academic stress. Emotional intelligence consists of several aspects such as self-efficacy, autonomy, competence, relatedness, academic motivation, self-management, self-awareness, relationship management, and avoidance behavior. These aspects are related to the individual's ability to recognize themselves and understand the emotions that are being felt (Çınar-Tanrıverdi & Karabacak-Çelik, 2023). It helps individuals to respond and find ways to adapt in resolving the emotions felt. Emotional intelligence helps individuals prepare preventive measures to prevent excessive increases in stress levels. The least level of significance is related to family involvement, especially on the variable of parental expectations. This condition is thought to be due to the perception of individuals in dealing with parental expectations, besides that it is also influenced by emotional intelligence factors such as the level of self-efficacy, autonomy, independence and social support so that in the study obtained insignificant results (Zheng et al., 2023).

The environmental side of the P-E Fit framework involves the external resources and demands that students face in the university ecosystem. Stress factors in the learning process have also been considered, such as presentations in class, overload of assigned work, teambased assignments, and testing situations. The extracted data shows that environmental dynamics, particularly social support and the educational setting, maintain a significant relationship with academic stress. Positive teaching environments and strong social support systems act as external

resources that help students meet institutional expectations, thereby maintaining a healthy person-environment balance (de la Fuente *et al.*, 2021). In contrast, the family environment shows a different pattern. The statistical evidence indicates that parental expectations do not have a significant direct relationship with academic stress. This lack of statistical significance suggests that parental expectations do not act as a simple external stressor. Instead, the actual impact of family expectations is likely altered or softened by other variables, such as the student's own level of independence, self efficacy, and the amount of external social support they receive.

5. Conclusion

Based on the study of the 12 selected articles, it can be concluded that university student stress relates to a combination of personal and environment factors. Personal factors such as emotional intelligence, self confidence, and how students manage their emotions associate closely with their stress levels. At the same time, environment factors like social support and the immediate learning environment also play a major role. However, these results have limitations. However, since nearly all reviewed studies relied on descriptive correlation and cross sectional designs, these findings only show statistical relationships rather than direct cause and effect. The implications of these findings suggest that academic institutions and counselors should establish targeted workshops and supportive sharing platforms within campus services to mitigate student academic pressure. For future studies, researchers should adopt uniform measurement scales across different student populations. It helps to provide consistent data to evaluate how personal and environmental variables correlate with student stress.

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