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**SOCIAL SUPPORT, COPING STRATEGIES AND ACADEMIC ADJUSTMENT OF FIRST YEAR UNIVERSITY UNDERGRADUATES IN RIVERS STATE, NIGERIA.**

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**ABSTRACT:** *This study was designed to determine the extent to which social support, and coping strategies predict academic adjustment of first year university undergraduates in Rivers State, Nigeria. Correlation design was adopted for the study. Three research questions and three corresponding hypotheses guided the conduct of the study at 0.05 alpha levels. A sample of 382 first year university undergraduates of Ignatius Ajuru University of Education, Port Harcourt, 2015/2016 academic session was drawn from the population through purposive and proportional stratified random sampling techniques. Three instruments namely; Multidimensional Scale for Perceived Social Support, Coping Strategies Inventory and Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire - Academic subscale were used for data collection. Simple and multiple regression analyses were used for data analysis. All data were subjected to analysis using statistical package for social science (SPSS). Results showed that; social support statistically significantly predicted academic adjustment of first year university undergraduates; coping strategies (problem-focused and emotion-focused) taken together statistically significantly predicted academic adjustment of first year university undergraduates; on the basis of individual contribution, problem-focused was a significant contributor to academic adjustment of first year university undergraduates while emotion-focused was not. Based on the findings, conclusion and recommendations were made.*

**KEYWORDS:** Social, support, coping, strategies, academic, and adjustment

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The transition from secondary school to university could be very challenging in the development of young men and women, and as such many students are inadequately prepared for the psychosocial realities of higher education. Year one university students are often confronted with the adaptational challenges of living apart from family and close friends, adjusting to the academic regimen, assuming responsibility for the tasks of daily living, as well as developing a new array of social relationship with coursemates, lecturers and other members of the university community.

However, within this new university environment, students have to be prepared to deal with these challenges by learning and internalizing the character as well as the rules and regulations that govern the institutions they are attending. The way in which students go about resolving these challenges and the degree to which they interact with the opportunities with which they are presented is known as their adjustment to university (Pasarella & Terenzini, 2006).

Gurung (2006) defined social support as the experience of being valued, respected, cared for, and loved by others. According to Dusselier, Dunn, Wang, Shelley and Whalen (2008), social support is known to help individuals to reduce the amount of stress experienced and to cope better in dealing with stressful life situations. Social support has been defined as “an exchange of resources between at least two individuals perceived by the provider or recipient to be intended to enhance the well-being of the recipient” (Shumaker & Brownell in Yasin & Dzulkifli, 2010). In his own view, Lin (2006) defined social support as perceived or actual instrumental and/or expressive provisions supplied by the community, social networks, and confiding partners.

Social support has two fundamental components such as; the number of available persons that one can rely on at the time of need, and the level of satisfaction an individual has with the support. Satisfaction with social support is affected by personality factors such as self-esteem and a feeling of control over the environment (Sarason, Levine, Basham, & Sarason, 2008). Yasin and Dzulkifli (2010) stated that social support may come from different sources such as family, friends, teachers, community, or any social groups to which one is affiliated. They further explained that social support can come in form of tangible assistance provided by others when needed which includes appraisal of different situations, effective coping strategies, and emotional support.

Coping has been viewed as a personal-internal (that is, intrapersonal) resource that may be mobilized in an effort to decrease, modify, or diffuse the impact of stress-generating life events and/or crisis situations. It is defined as a person’s constantly changing cognitive and behavioural efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person. The individual’s coping responses or strategies are therefore important in sustaining overall functioning during a stressful person – environment interaction (Lazarus & Folkman, in McNulty, 2014).

According to Lazarus and Folkman in McNulty (2014), coping strategies have been dichotomized into problem-focused coping strategies, or making attempts to actively alter a problematic situation, and emotion-focused coping strategies, or managing emotional responses to a problematic situation. Lenz (2010) defined problem-focused coping as a situation in which individuals make effort to directly confront and manage the source of their stress. Individuals prefer to tackle directly with the stress by confronting, controlling, or managing stressful tasks. Aspinwall and Taylor in Khan (2013) posited that problem-focused coping is an example of active coping. According to Carver, Scheier and Weintraub (2011), active coping is the process of taking active steps to try to remove or eliminate the stressor or to weaken its effects.

Emotion- focused coping is viewed by Lenz (2010) as individuals trying to control their emotional response to stress. Individuals manage the emotional aspect of the stress rather than tackle the tasks. Aspinwall and Taylor in Khan (2013) stated that emotion-focused coping is an example of avoidant coping. Lenz (2010) defined avoidant coping as removing or distancing oneself from the source of stress.

McNulty (2014) explained that the ways people cope depend on the resources that are available to them. He posited that one important psychological resource for coping is viewing oneself

positively. Others include problem-solving skills, social skills, social support, and material resources. To him, coping has two important functions; control of emotions or distress (emotion-focused coping) and management or elimination of the problem that is causing the distress (problem-focused coping).

A study of the relationship between adjustment and social support in international students' experience was conducted by Lin (2006). The results of the study were in line with the literature that social support helped the students between adjustment to the college and campus life. Furthermore, the study revealed that the university staff support offered the new corners acceptance and assurance. Even the mails and messages sent to the students helped to relieve pressure and stress.

Ward and Kennedy (2007) found an interesting result in their study with 113 British citizens living in Singapore. In their study, they examined the relationship between the coping styles and adjustment, and social support was accepted as one way of coping in the study. While they found a significant relationship between avoidant coping, humor, approach coping and adjustment, acceptance and social support were found to be unrelated to the adjustment process.

Yasin and Dzulkipli (2010) investigated the relationship between social support and psychological problems among students in Malaysia. Correlation coefficient was used to measure the relationship between social support and psychological problems. The findings revealed that there were significant negative relationship between social support and psychological problems suggesting that the higher the social support, the lower the psychological problem.

Friedlander, Reid, Shupak and Cribbie (2007) examined the joint effects of stress, social support, and self-esteem on adjustment to university first-year undergraduate students (N=115) were assessed during the first semester and again 10 weeks later, during the second semester of the academic year. Result showed that from the fall to winter semesters, increased social support from friends, but not from family, predicted improved adjustment. The influence of parental social support was examined in a study by Cutrona, Cole, Cocangelo, Aaouline and Russel (2007) which examined whether parental social support would predict academic performance in college students. The results revealed a significant positive relationship between parental social support and predicted pre-college academic performance.

In his study of coping styles, social support and depression in male and female college students, Aycock (2011) found that there was no gender difference in number of supports or in satisfaction with social support. Hierarchical regression and ANCOVA were used for data analysis. Another study by Otlu (2010) investigated the role of gender, acculturative stress, coping skills, cultural distance, and perceived social support in predicting college adjustment scores of international students who attend universities in Ankara. Hierarchical multiple regression analysis revealed that perceived social support did not predict college adjustment scores of international students.

Salami (2011) examined the contribution of psychological and social factors to the prediction of adjustment to college. Regression analysis revealed that social support predicted adjustment among first year college of education students.

A study that examined the college adaptation and coping skills relationship was conducted by Tuna (2010). The results revealed that active coping and using emotional support positively predicted the overall adjustment of students while denial, behavioural disengagement, substance use, and religion negatively predicted first year students' overall college adjustment in both Turkish and American samples. Abdullah et al. (2010) explored the relationship between coping and university adjustment and academic achievement among first year undergraduates in a Malaysian public university. Findings from the study showed that there is a significant and positive relationship between students' coping and their overall university adjustment.

Another study investigating differential coping styles on predictors of college adjustment among 161 first-year students attending an Eastern Ivy League college was conducted by Leong, Bonz and Zachar (2007). Furthermore, psychosocial-emotional adjustment to college was negatively related to focus on and venting of emotions, and emotion-focused, disengagement response which consists of coping by emotional catharsis, a strategy that arguably is less useful in responding to stress.

Pooley, Cohen, O'Connor, and Taylor (2012) studied 512 participants who had experienced a traumatic stressful event in northwest Australia. Results revealed that individuals who engaged in emotion-focused coping had lower self-efficacy levels. Aycock (2011) studied coping styles, social support and depression in male and female college students using 654 participants drawn through convenience sampling technique.. Hierarchical regression and ANCOVA were used for data analysis. Results indicated that females made more use of coping styles (emotion focused and problem focused) than males.

Otlu (2010) investigated the role of gender, acculturative stress, coping skills, cultural distance, and perceived social support in predicting college adjustment scores of international students who attend universities in Ankara. Hierarchical multiple regression analysis was conducted to analyze data. Results revealed that positive coping skills predicted college adjustment scores of international students. Park and Fenster (2006) studied stress related growth as predictors of recurrence and correlates with psychological adjustment in which 94 college students were selected through stratified random sampling technique. Multiple regression analysis showed that specific coping processes (resources, appraisals, and coping activities) predicted adjustment of students.

Nader (2006) studied the coping strategies of stress and academic achievement among students in Qatar university using 284 students (144 male and 140 female), selected via stratified random sampling method. Brief Cope and Mathematics Achievement Test were used. Independent t-test statistical tool was used for data analysis. The study found that the most common strategies used by the students were to think positive and recourse of Allah.

Based on the empirical literature reviewed, the present researchers observed that none of the previous researchers studied contributions of social support and coping strategies (problem-focused and emotion-focused) to the prediction of academic adjustment of first year university undergraduates in Rivers State, Nigeria. This was the rationale behind the conduct of this study.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Correlational design by multiple prediction design was used for the study. Multiple prediction design was relevant in the present study because the study sought to find out the extent to which the independent variables (social support and coping strategies) predict the dependent variable (academic adjustment).

A sample of 382 year one students of Ignatius Ajuru University of Education, Port Harcourt, 2015/2016 session was used for the study. Simple and proportional stratified random sampling techniques were used to select participants for the study.

Three instruments were used in this study, namely; Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS) developed by Zimet, Dahlem, Zimet and Parley (1988), Coping Strategies Inventory by Tobin (2001), and Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire (SACQ) by Baker and Siryk (1989). The three instruments had earlier been validated by their originators/authors. However, to ensure validity of the instruments in the present study since they were adapted, their face and content validity were done by two experts in measurement and evaluation. All the corrections were incorporated before the final draft was made.

The reliability of the three instruments was established by their originators. However, for the purpose of the present study, the reliability of the three instruments was determined by the researcher through the test-retest method. The initial and the (second) retest scores were then correlated using Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient. The reliability coefficient obtained for Multidimensional Scale for Perceived Social Support (MSPSS) was 0.80. The reliability coefficients obtained for problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping were 0.77 and 0.74 respectively. Finally, the reliability coefficient obtained for Student Adjustment to College Questionnaire (SACQ) (academic adjustment sub section) was 0.82.

## RESULTS

**Research Question 1:** To what extent does social support predict academic adjustment of first year university undergraduates?

**Hypothesis 1:** Social support does not significantly predict academic adjustment of first year university undergraduates.

**Table 4.1:** Contribution of Social Support to the Prediction of Academic Adjustment of First Year University Undergraduates

R = 0.420						
R <sup>2</sup> = 0.176						
Adjustment R <sup>2</sup> = 0.227						
Std. Error of Estimate = 10.996						
Model	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Sq.	F	P-Val	Result
Regression	17.891	1	17.891	1.148	0.000	Sig.
Residual	45943.795	380	120.905			
Total	45961.686	381				

Table 4.1 shows that  $R = 0.42$ ,  $p < 0.05$ . This indicates that there is a positive relationship between social support and academic adjustment of first year university undergraduates. Finally, the Table (4.1) shows F-ratio of  $F(1, 380) = 1.148$ , and  $p < 0.05$ . Hence, hypothesis three was rejected. This implies that social support significantly predicted academic adjustment of first year university undergraduates.

**Research Question 2:** To what extent do coping strategies (problem focused, emotion focused) taken together predict academic adjustment of first year university undergraduates?

**Hypothesis 2:** Coping strategies (problem-focused, emotion-focused) taken together do not significantly predict academic adjustment of first year university undergraduates.

**Table 4.2:** Multiple Regression Analysis of Coping Strategies and Academic Adjustment of First Year University Undergraduates

R = 0.544						
R <sup>2</sup> = 0.296						
Adjustment R <sup>2</sup> = 0.162						
Std. Error of Estimate = 10.998						
Model	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Sq.	F	P-Val	Result
Regression	0.589	2	0.589	3.005	0.002	Sig.
Residual	45961.097	379	120.950			
Total	45961.686	381				

Table 4.2 shows that  $R = 0.544$ ,  $p < 0.05$ . This indicates that there is a positive relationship between coping strategies (problem-focused and emotion-focused) and academic adjustment of first year university undergraduates. The result is that coping strategies taken together predicted academic adjustment of first year university undergraduates. Hence, hypothesis five was rejected. This implies that coping strategies (problem-focused and emotion-focused) taken together significantly predicted academic adjustment of first year university undergraduates.

**Research Question 3:** To what extent does coping strategies (problem-focused, emotion-focused) taken separately predict academic adjustment of first year university undergraduates?

**Hypothesis 3:** Coping Strategies (problem-focused, emotion-focused) taken separately do not predict academic adjustment of first year university undergraduates.

**Table 4.3:** Relative Contribution of Each Coping Strategy to the Prediction of Academic Adjustment of First Year University Undergraduates

Independent Variables	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t Value	Sig. Levels	Result
	$\beta$	Std. Error	$\beta$			
Constant	44.171	2.370		18.635	0.000	
Problem-focused	0.427	0.052	0.625	3.056	0.001	Sig.
Emotion-focused	0.201	0.018	0.243	1.187	0.852	Not Sig.

Table 4.3 shows the relative contribution of each coping strategy (problem-focused coping, emotion-focused) to the prediction of academic adjustment of first year university undergraduates. Significant t-value indicates that the relative contribution of problem-focused coping strategy ( $\beta = 0.625, t = 3.056, p < 0.05$ ) to the prediction of academic adjustment of first year university undergraduates was significant, while the reverse is the case for emotion-focused coping strategy ( $\beta = 0.243, t = 1.187, p > 0.05$ ).

## DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Table 4.1 showed that  $R = 0.42, R^2 = 0.176, p < 0.05$ . The result is that social support significantly predicted academic adjustment of first year university undergraduates. Result also indicated that there is a low positive relationship between the predictor and criterion variables. The Table (4.1) further revealed that  $R^2 = 0.176$  which means that social support accounted for 17.6% of the variance in academic adjustment, and this is statistically significant  $p < 0.05$ .

This present finding agrees with Salami (2011) who also found that social support predicted adjustment among first year college of education students. The present finding further supported that of Friedlander, et al. (2007) who in their study of the joint effect of stress, social support and self-esteem found that from the fall of winter semesters, increased social support from friends, but not from family, predicted improved adjustment. Furthermore, the present finding lends support to Cutrona, et al. (2007) whose result revealed a significant positive relationship between parental social support and predicted pre-college academic performance. This present finding is not surprising because assistance from parents, brothers, sisters, friends, lecturers and non-academic staff will cushion the effects of stress experienced by first year university students. Newly admitted university students get easily adjusted academically if they are sure of receiving assistance from their social support network when the need arises. However, findings that disagree with the present one were found by Ward and Kennedy (2007), and Otlu (2010). Differences in locale of the study, sample size, and sampling technique may have contributed to the variations in the findings.

Table 4.2 indicated  $R$  of 0.544,  $R^2 = 0.296, p < 0.05$ . The result is that coping strategies (problem-focused and emotion-focused) taken together significantly predicted academic adjustment of first year university undergraduates. Result also indicated that there is a moderate positive relationship between coping strategies (problem-focused and emotion-focused) and academic adjustment. The table (4.2) further revealed that  $R^2 = 0.296$  which means that coping strategies (problem-focused and emotion-focused) taken together accounted for 29.6% variance in academic adjustment and this is statistically significant  $p < 0.05$ . More so, significant t-value indicated that the relative contribution of problem-focused strategy ( $\beta = 0.625, t = 3.056, p < 0.05$ ) to the prediction of academic adjustment of first year university undergraduates was significant at 0.05 level of significant while that of emotion-focused strategy ( $\beta = 0.243, t = 1.187, p > 0.05$ ) was not significant at 0.05 alpha level.

The finding of the present study is in agreement with Abdullah et al. (2010) who in their study of the relationship between coping and university adjustment and academic achievement among first year undergraduates in a Malaysian public university, found that there is a significant and positive relationship between students' coping and their overall university adjustment. More so, the present finding lends credence to Pooley et al. (2012) who found that individuals who engaged in emotion-focused coping had lower self-efficacy levels. The present

finding also corroborated Park and Fenster (2006), and Otlu (2010). This result is in line because on daily basis university students generally and particularly newly admitted university undergraduates make conscious efforts to confront stressful academic tasks. Newly admitted university undergraduates are aware that to achieve academic excellence, there is need for them to take active steps to deal with stressful academic situations.

However, the present finding is dissimilar with Nader (2006) who in his study of coping strategies of stress and academic achievement among students in Qatar university found that the most common strategies used by the students were to think positive and recourse of Allah (emotion-focused strategy). The divergent results for the present and past studies may be attributed to many reasons. While the present study was carried out in Rivers State, Nigeria, the past study was undertaken in Qatar. Furthermore, while academic adjustment was the dependent variable in the present study, academic achievement was investigated as the dependent variable in the past study. Finally, while multiple regression statistics was employed for data analysis in the present study, independent t-test was used in the past study.

## CONCLUSION

The following conclusions were made based on the findings of this study:

1. Social support is a significant contributor to the prediction of academic adjustment of first year university undergraduates at 0.05 alpha levels.
2. Coping strategies (problem-focused and emotion-focused) significantly predict academic adjustment of first year university undergraduates. However, on individual basis, problem-focused coping strategy is a significant contributor to the prediction of academic adjustment of first year university undergraduates.
3. However, on individual basis, problem-focused coping strategy is a significant contributor to the prediction of academic adjustment of first year university undergraduates, while emotion-focused coping strategy is not significant at 0.05 alpha levels.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

1. In this study, it was found that social support significantly predicted academic adjustment of first year university undergraduates. However, it is therefore recommended that university undergraduates should develop a greater awareness and understanding significant and key people that can assist them to effectively cope with challenges encountered in their new university environment.
2. The study revealed that coping strategies (problem-focused and emotion-focused) have been found to jointly and significantly predict academic adjustment of first year university undergraduates. Therefore, it is recommended that university undergraduates should learn effective ways of coping with stressful situations which they encounter in their new university environment. Effective strategies will help university undergraduates' adjust to their new environment.
3. Problem-focused coping strategy was found to be a significant individual contributor to the prediction of academic adjustment of first year university undergraduates. It is therefore, recommended that university undergraduates should endeavour to tackle the challenges associated with their new university environment headlong rather than manage the emotional aspect of the stress.

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