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Exploring the Impact of Achievement vs. Study Skills on College Students' Perceived Academic Stress: A Comparative Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Research has demonstrated that study skills can enhance academic performance; however, the understanding of how varying levels of study skills and academic achievement affect academic stress is limited. This study aimed to investigate the effects of college students' study skill levels and academic achievement on their academic stress. A total of 351 randomly selected college students from 16 different fields of study participated. Data were collected via a questionnaire that assessed academic stress related to students' workloads, self-perceptions, academic expectations, study skills and academic achievement (measured by the CGPA). The analysis revealed that both study skill level and academic achievement have a statistically significant main effect on academic stress, with different levels of study skills and achievement being associated with varying levels of academic stress and a modest effect size. However, the interaction effect between study skill level and academic achievement in relation to perceived academic stress was not statistically significant. Post hoc tests indicated that students with low academic skills reported lower academic stress than did those with average academic skills did, and students with low academic achievement experienced greater academic stress than did their high-achieving counterparts did. The findings suggest important implications for educators, counselors and college students, emphasizing the need for targeted interventions to address study skills and achievement-related stress.

Keywords
Academic Stress
Achievement Level
Education
Study Skill Level

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Introduction

College students encounter both opportunities and challenges during their academic journeys. Bhujade [1] noted that 10 to 20% of college students reported experiencing psychological issues such as stress, anxiety, or depression at any given time. Academic stress, in particular, is often identified as a major factor that impacts students' mental well-being [2]. This stress arises from the various internal and external expectations placed on students [3]. However, mediating factors such as self-perception and identity may play a role in the stress process [4]. This study aims to examine the relationships of academic performance and study skills with academic stress.

Stress can be defined as a state of worry or mental tension triggered by challenging situations [5]. It occurs when environmental demands exceed an individual's natural regulatory capacity, particularly in situations characterized by unpredictability and a lack of control [6]. Common physical symptoms due to psychological stress include headaches, whereas depression and anxiety are frequent psychological symptoms [7]. Life satisfaction, locus of control, and gender are also significant predictors of academic stress [8]. Stress helps individuals addresschallenges and threats [9]. Although students face different stressors in many areas of their studies, academic demands are the primary source of stress for college students [10].

Academic stress refers to the psychological and emotional strain experienced in response to academic demands such as exams, assignments, and performance pressures [11]. This type of stress has become a significant part of students' academic lives due to various internal and external expectations [3]. On average, students report moderate levels of stress, with only 12% indicating high stress levels [7]. Similarly, Saleh et al., [12] reported that 71.67% of college students reported moderate stress, 20.83% reported high stress, 63.6% reported moderate academic stress, and 27.3% reported high stress [13].

Students primarily face high stress due to exam results, tests, peer pressures, and self-imposed stress [14]. Academic stressors include time management challenges, academic pressure, overcrowded lecture halls, inadequate resources, low motivation, fear of failure, and interpersonal difficulties [3],[15].

Academic achievement is a key indicator of the quality of learning and extent to which students or institutions achieve educational goals [16]. Steinmayr et al. [17] defined academic

achievement as "the performance outcomes that demonstrate the extent to which specific educational goals are accomplished". Academic performance is commonly measured through standardized test results, grades, GPA, graduation rates, and other performance indicators [18].

Research underscores the importance of study skills in improving the quality of learning [19], and studies suggest that good study skills in courses lead to better student retention [20]. A diverse range of study skills can enhance learning outcomes positively [21]. Study skills are integral to self-regulated learning, encompassing task assessment, goal setting, and planning [22].

Effective study strategies include time management, overcoming procrastination, maintaining concentration, utilizing study aids, taking notes, implementing test strategies, and remaining motivated, creating a conducive study environment, self-management, stress management, and note taking and reading comprehension [23],[24]. Study skills can be classified into repetition-based, procedural, cognitive-based, and metacognitive categories [25],[26] and are applied in both individual studies and group discussions [26].

Perceptions of study skills influence study habits and academic performance [27]. Research skills training improves self-efficacy, planning, and motivation while reducing emotional impacts and a lack of control over outcomes [28].

Previous research has shown varying results regarding the relationship between study skills and academic stress. Variations in study skills are evident among students with different academic abilities. Students who are struggling academically often demonstrate less effective study skills than their higher-performing peers do [29]. Stress can arise at different stages of the study process. For example, Mustapha et al. [26] reported that 20.1% of students often feel tired before studying, and 22% use stimulants to extend their study sessions. Additionally, factors such as better study skills, self-concept, and psychological distress have been associated with greater test anxiety [30]. Conversely, test anxiety has been negatively correlated with effective study habits [31].

Greater academic stress is correlated with lower grades [32]. Academic stress negatively impacts grades for students with low resourcefulness but not for those with high resourcefulness [33]. There is a moderate negative correlation between academic performance and stress sources, as well as stress levels [34]. High-performing students often report experiencing more academic stress [35]. Research has revealed no significant difference between cumulative GPA and academic stress [13], and academic and family stress can negatively affect academic performance and learning outcomes [36].

A. Rationale of the Study

A substantial proportion of college students report experiencing psychological issues such as stress, anxiety, and depression, with academic stress being a prominent factor. This is due to stressful life incidents and workloads, poor time management, note taking and interpersonal relationship skills in their academic journeys. Understanding the sources of academic stress and its relationship with academic performance and study skills is crucial for developing effective strategies to support student well-being and academic success. Therefore, this study helps to examine how the level of study skills and academic achievement affect students' mental well-being, such as academic stress. This knowledge is important for educators, counselors, and policymakers in developing support systems and educational programs that address the needs of students experiencing academic stress.

B. Hypotheses

- **H1:** College students with high levels of study skills report lower levels of academic stress than do students with average or low levels of study skills.
- **H2:** College students with high academic achievement report experiencing higher levels of academic stress than do students with average or low academic achievement.
- **H3:** Study skills moderate the relationship between academic achievement and perceived academic stress.

Research methods

A cross-sectional survey research design was employed to understand the nature of the relationship of teacher trainees' academic achievement and study skills level with their perceived academic stress.

A. Participants

The participants of the study were 3rd-year first-semester teacher trainees at Bonga College of Education, a government college in southwestern Ethiopia. A total of 351 teacher trainees were selected from 856 teacher trainees, accounting for 41.12%, via systematic random sampling techniques. Among these teacher trainees, 183 (52.1%) were females, and 168 (47.9%) were males. The teacher trainees were selected from 16 departments (laboratory and subject area trainees), namely, five languages, three behavioral sciences, four social studies, and four natural sciences. The response rate was 88.56%.

B. Measures

Perceived Academic achievement**:** Students' 1st- and 2nd-year CGPA were used as indicators of their academic achievement. Students' level of achievement was classified into high, average and high achievement using 33% cutoffs of the CGPA.

Perceived study skills: Students' study skills were measured via the Manjunath [37] study skill competence scale. The instrument has five scales: never to always (Never=0, Almost never=1, sometimes=2, Fairly often=3 and always=4). For example, I take care of my materials (books, desk(s), and locker).

The lowest score indicates the presence of lower study skills, whereas a higher score indicates high study skills in the college. A pilot test was employed on 2nd-year college students, and the study skills scale had 11 items and a Cronbach's alpha correlation coefficient of .85. Students' level of study skill was classified into high, average and high achievement using 33% cutoffs of the frequency of the study skill total scores. The instrument was translated from English to the Amharic language, which is the official language of the country.

Perceived academic stress (PAS): This measure was originally developed by Bedewy & Gabriel [38]. The instrument has 18 items. The content of the PAS scale included stress related to academic expectations, workload and examination, and academic self-perception. Each item had five rating scales ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. For example, I believe that the amount of work assigned is too high. The instrument was pilot tested and was found to have Cronbach's alpha coefficients of .73. The highest score indicates the presence of high stress, and the lowest score indicates the presence of low academic stress in the college.

C. Data analysis

Both descriptive and inferential data analysis were employed. The mean, standard deviation, percentile and two-way ANOVA were employed. Two-way ANOVA was used to test for significant differences in the main effects of the three levels of academic achievement and study skill groups on teacher trainees' perceived academic stress, and the interaction effect between the two variables and the post hoc test were used to observe the differences among the students in each achievement and study skill group. The statistically significant threshold level was the 95% confidence level. The SPSS version 23 tool was employed.

Results

Among the 351 students, 127 had low achievers, 106 had average achievers, and 118 had high achievers. The sample sizes across achievement levels are also relatively balanced, with slight variation between the groups. Similarly, 130 students had low study skills, 114 had average study skills, and 107 had high study skills. The sample sizes are fairly balanced across the study skill and achievement levels. This balance is important for ensuring that the effects observed are not due to unequal group sizes.

To use two-way ANOVA, the equality of variance and Levene's test of equality of error variances for the two samples were checked and found to be not significant (p=.106). To

interpret the main and interaction effects from the descriptive statistics provided, the dependent variable is academic stress, and the independent variables or the factors are study skill level (low, average, high) and achievement level (low achievers, average achievers, high achievers), and their average values are reported separately.

The mean academic stress for students with an average study skill level was 3.15 (SD=.60), that for those with a high study skill level was 3.00 (SD=.62), and that for those with a low study skill level was 2.95 (SD=.55) (Table 1).

Table 1. Mean Academic Stress across Students' Study Skills Level

Study skill level	Mean	N	SD
Low study skill	2.95	130	.55
Average study skill level	3.15	114	.60
High study skill level	3.00	107	.62
Total	3.03	351	.59

The mean academic stress for low achievers was 3.14 (SD=.66), that for average achievers was 3.04 9 (SD=.50), and that for high achievers was 2.90 (SD=.57) (Table 1).

Table 2. Mean Academic Stress Across Achievement Levels

Achievement level	Mean	N	SD
Low achievers	3.14	127	.66
Average achievers	3.04	106	.50
High Achievers	2.90	118	.57
Total	3.03	351	.59

To interpret the ANOVA results, for the main effect, study skill level has a statistically significant main effect on academic stress, $F(2,341)= 3.501$, $p=.031$, $\eta^2 =.020$, indicating that different levels of study skills are associated with different levels of academic stress, and the partial earnings squared (η^2) of 0.020 suggests a small effect size, meaning that while study skill level impacts academic stress, the magnitude of this effect is modest.

Similarly, Achievement level has a statistically significant main effect on academic stress, $F(2,342)=5.505$, $p=0.004$, $\eta^2 =.031$, which means that different achievement levels are associated with varying levels of academic stress. The partial eta squared of 0.031 indicates a small effect size. The interaction effect of study skill level and achievement level on perceived academic stress was not statistically significant ($F(4, 342)=0.859$, $p=0.489$, $\eta^2 =.010$). This finding indicates that the impact of one factor (study skill level) on academic stress does not depend on the level of the other factor (achievement level), and the partial earnings squared of 0.010 suggests a very small effect size, meaning that the interaction effect has little practical significance (Table 3).

Table 3. Two Way ANOVA for Perceived Academic Stress differences among students' with different level of Study Skill and Achievement

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Study skill level	2.366	2	1.183	3.501	.031*	.020
Achievement level	3.721	2	1.861	5.505	.004**	.031
Study skill level * Achievement level	1.161	4	.290	.859	.489	.010
Error	115.594	342	.338			
Total	3345.570	351				

* significant at .05; ** significant at .01

The Tukey HSD test used to compare the low study skill and average study skill levels revealed that **t**he mean difference between the low study skill and average study skill levels was -0.2021, which was statistically significant (p = 0.019). The negative value indicates that, on average, students with low study skill report lower academic stress than do students with average study skill; the mean difference between the low study skill and high study skill levels is -0.0474, which is not statistically significant (p = 0.807). This suggests that there is no significant difference in academic stress between students with low and high study skill levels and that **t**he mean difference between the average study skill level and high study skill level is 0.1547, which is not statistically significant (p = 0.120).

These findings suggest that academic stress varies significantly between low and average study skill levels but not between low and high or average and high study skill levels. This could imply that improving study skills from a low level to an average level has a noticeable effect on reducing academic stress (Fig. 1), but further improvements beyond this average level do not significantly increase stress.

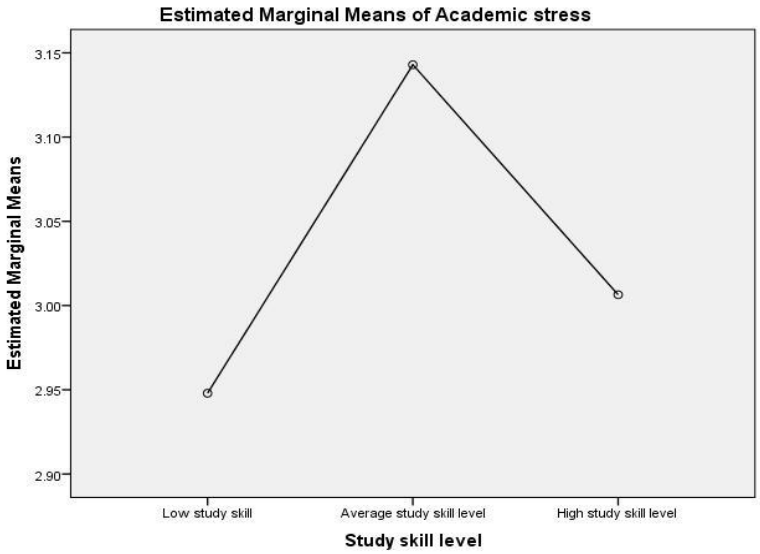


Fig. 1. Effect of study skill level on academic stress

Similarly, the mean difference between low achievers and average achievers was 0.1035, which was not statistically significant (p = 0.367), suggesting that there was no significant difference in academic stress between low achievers and average achievers. The mean difference between low achievers and high achievers was 0.2392, which was statistically significant (p = 0.004), indicating that low achievers experienced greater academic stress than high achievers did. Finally, the mean difference between average achievers and high achievers was 0.1357, which was not statistically significant (p = 0.190). These findings suggest that there is no significant difference in academic stress between average achievers and high achievers. These results suggest that academic stress decreases significantly from low achievers to high achievers (Fig. 2). However, there was no significant difference in stress between low achievers and average achievers or between average achievers and high achievers. These findings indicate that achieving a higher level of academic performance is associated with lower academic stress. These findings indicate that improving academic achievement can reduce students' academic stress.

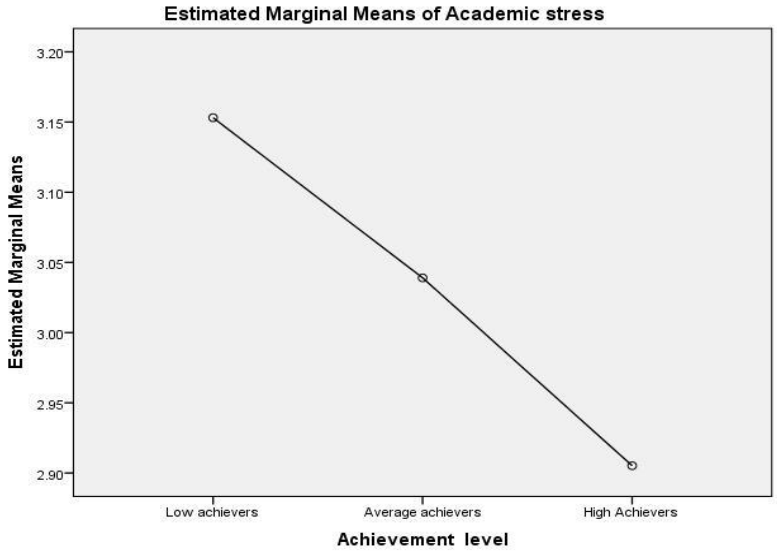


Fig. 2. Effect of academic achievement level on academic stress

Discussion

The research findings indicated that different levels of study skills and achievement levels had statistically significant main effects on the perceived academic stress of the students. When we compare students with low and average study skills, students with low study skills report significantly lower academic stress than do those with average study skills. This suggests that students with poor study habits might not perceive the same level of pressure as those with moderate study skills, possibly due to different coping mechanisms or lower expectations, workloads, time management and note-taking skills; however, the lack of a significant difference in stress levels between students with low and high study skills suggests

that having high study skills does not necessarily equate to lower stress, and the lack of a significant difference in stress between students with average and high study skills indicates that simply having good study habits might not be enough to reduce stress unless accompanied by other factors, such as adequate support and realistic expectations.

The hypothesis that students with high levels of study skills would report lower stress than those with average or low levels was only partially supported. Specifically, high-level study skills do not necessarily lead to significantly lower stress than low-level skills do, suggesting that other factors are at play. This was supported by Abood & Jaradat [39] in that improved study habits alone may not be sufficient to alleviate academic stress, and Numan & Hasan [31] also suggested that high study skills might not always correlate with lower anxiety. According to Mustapha et al. [26], factors such as self-concept and psychological distress contribute to greater test anxiety, supporting the idea that stress is multifaceted and not solely influenced by study skills. Hyseni Duraku & Hoxha [30] also indicate that students with high expectations and certain levels of effort might experience greater stress, which resonates with the observation that students with average study skills face greater stress due to their expectations and struggles.

In terms of achievement level, achievement level also had a statistically significant effect on academic stress. Different levels of achievement are associated with varying levels of academic stress. The specific comparisons revealed that low achievers reported significantly greater academic stress than high achievers did; however, there was no significant difference in stress levels between low and average achievers or between average and high achievers. These findings indicate that students with higher levels of achievement tend to have lower levels of academic stress. This might be due to the associations between students' ability and other skills, such as study skills, time management and note-taking, which are characteristics of achiever achievement.

Therefore, the hypothesis that college students with high academic achievement will report experiencing higher levels of academic stress than students with average or low academic achievement is more likely to be rejected. The significant difference in stress between low Achievers and high Achievers suggests that achieving greater academic performance can lead to lower stress, whereas the differences between average Achievers and high Achievers are not substantial. Struthers et al. [32] also reported that greater academic stress is correlated with lower grades. This could be due to the personal resources that students have. For example, Akgun & Ciarrochi [33] reported that academic stress negatively impacts grades for students with low resourcefulness.

In terms of the mediating effect of study skills on the relationship between academic achievement level and academic stress, the interaction effect between study skill level and achievement level with respect to academic stress was not statistically significant. This means that the effect of study skills on academic stress is not influenced by the level of academic achievement, and vice versa. In other words, the impact of one factor (study skill level) on academic stress does not depend on the level of the other factor (achievement level). Therefore, the hypothesis that study skills moderate the relationship between academic achievement and perceived academic stress was rejected. The lack of a significant interaction indicates that study skills do not significantly influence how academic achievement affects academic stress. In other words, students' study skills do not influence the strength or direction of the relationship between their level of academic achievement and their stress levels. The possible reason for the lack of interaction may be student stress management; high-level study skills are generally beneficial for managing academic tasks and potentially reducing stress. Other factors, such as personal resilience, external support, or the specific nature of academic demands, might play a more substantial role in how stress is experienced by students at different levels of achievement.

On the basis of the findings and discussion provided, several implications can be drawn from research on study skills, academic achievement, and perceived academic stress. Research highlights that the relationships among study skills, academic achievement, and academic stress are complex and not fully straightforward. While having high academic skills is generally beneficial, it does not necessarily guarantee lower academic stress levels. These findings suggest that academic stress is influenced by a variety of psychological factors beyond study skills, such as self-concept, psychological distress, and personal resilience. Thus, interventions aimed at reducing academic stress should address these multiple dimensions, not just focus on improving study habits. Therefore, offering comprehensive support systems that include study skills training, psychological support, stress management resources, time management, note taking and realistic academic goal setting can help address the broader factors contributing to academic stress.

The observation that low achievers report greater stress than high achievers do but not between average and high achievers or average achievers and lower achievers suggests that stress reduction strategies may need to be tailored according to achievement levels. For example, low achievers might benefit from interventions focused on building resilience and managing stress, whereas high achievers might need support in balancing their high expectations and maintaining well-being.

The lack of a significant interaction between study skills and achievement levels in relation to stress indicates that it is crucial to recognize that study skills alone do not moderate

the relationship between academic achievement and stress. Other factors, such as personal resilience, external support, training and specific academic demands, may play a more significant role in determining stress levels. Given that different students experience stress differently on the basis of their study skills and achievement levels, educational institutions should consider personalized stress management programs that cater to individual needs. This could involve assessing students' specific challenges and providing tailored strategies for managing stress effectively.

Finally, the findings suggest several avenues for further research. Future studies should investigate other factors that might influence the relationships among study skills, achievement levels, and academic stress, such as social support, time management, and self-efficacy. Similarly, long-term studies could provide insights into how changes in study skills and achievement levels over time affect stress levels and academic outcomes. Overall, both study skills and academic achievement significantly impact academic stress, but their effects are complex and influenced by a range of other factors. Effective stress management in academic settings requires a holistic approach that considers multiple aspects of students' experiences and needs.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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