A Comparative Study of Stress among Undergraduates of Law in Public and Private Universities in the Colombo District

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Abstract

This study explores factors affecting stress among law undergraduates in public and private universities in the Colombo District, Sri Lanka, focusing on the University of Colombo (public) and the Royal Institute of Colombo (private). Data were collected using a questionnaire that included the Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scale (DASS-21), with 21 statements, and the Undergraduate Sources of Stress Questionnaire, adapted by the researcher. From an equal allocation sample size of 260, 252 respondents participated, with 130 from the public entity and 122 from the private entity, using stratified sampling. Descriptive analysis revealed significant socioeconomic and academic differences between the two groups, while Structural Equation Modeling with Partial Least Squares analysis identified personal factors as the strongest contributors to stress. Academic pressures were significant for private university students, while public university students experienced higher overall stress levels. These findings underscore the need for tailored mediation in universities, with a focus on personal well-being support in public institutions and academic support in private ones.

Keywords: Academic pressures, DASS-21, Personal factors, Stress, Undergraduates, Well-being

Introduction

Stress among university students, particularly law students, is a significant issue due to the high academic demands, heavy workloads, and competitive environment, leading to elevated stress levels. (Larcombe et al., 2012). Research shows that law students experience higher psychological distress compared to their peers in other disciplines, impacting both their wellness and academic success. (Dahlin et al., 2005). In Sri Lanka, students at public universities, especially in Colombo, face overcrowded lecture halls and limited resources, which intensify stress. (Mahees, 2020). Meanwhile, private university students experience financial stress despite better facilities due to high tuition fees. (Eva et al., 2015). Although there is substantial research on student stress, studies specifically focusing on law undergraduates in Sri Lanka are limited. General studies have identified academic pressure, financial difficulties, and personal issues as common sources of stress. (Misra & Castillo, 2004). However, few have explored how these stressors affect law students, especially in relation to the distinctions between public and private universities. The current study aims to bridge this gap by comparing stress levels and stress-inducing factors experienced by law undergraduates at public and private universities in the Colombo district.

The findings will aid in understanding student mental health, offering insights for educational institutions to implement targeted interventions that support student well-being and improve mental health resources, particularly for law students in Sri Lanka. This study will examine and compare stress levels in both public and private law

undergraduates, focusing on their underlying causes. As noted by Sjoberg (1955), comparative studies are essential for testing relationships across different socio-cultural settings, making this approach ideal given the distinct differences between students at the two types of institutions. Stress has been closely linked to depression in university students. (Dixon & Kurpius, 2008). While a certain amount of stress can be motivating, excessive stress can trigger or exacerbate psychological health disorders such as depression and anxiety. Depression may even contribute to thoughts of suicide, which can increase suicide rates. This aligns with the third Sustainable Development Goal, which seeks to lower early death rates by non-communicable diseases, including mental health issues, by one-third by the year 2030. Therefore, this study is vital to advancing both academic knowledge and global health goals.

In view of the context, this paper explores the factors affecting stress among undergraduates of Law in public and private universities in the Colombo district, while drawing comparisons.

Defining Stress

 "Stress", the emotional phenomenon that could affect individuals from all walks of life, was called by the World Health Organization (WHO), to be the "health epidemic of the 21st century." (Fink, 2016). (Selye, 1976) stated that, in behavioral sciences, stress is seen as the recognition of a threat, leading to anxiety, emotional strain, discomfort, and challenges in adaptation. His outlook and study of stress are psychological in nature. According to him, the psychological response to stress progresses in three steps; firstly, the body is alerted and it reacts with an alarm reaction, then the body prepares to react to the stress with the trigger of an autonomic activity and finally if the stress continues beyond the capacity of the body, the stage of exhaustion dawns in, with a damage or collapse to the system.

Factors contributing to stress among university students

The conceptual framework of this study identifies demographic factors, as well as academic, personal, and financial issues, as factors affecting stress among law undergraduates. These factors could contribute to undergraduate stress in varying degrees.

Demographic factors

Pau et al. (2007) conducted a multinational survey to investigate the association between perceived stress and emotional intelligence among undergraduates in dental studies across seven countries. An important finding of this study was that respondents with elevated perceived stress scores were more likely to be female than male students. Morse & Dravo (2007) conducted a study to identify factors causing stress and at-risk groups within the undergraduate oral health care programs at The Fiji School of Medicine, and found that, for 27% of items, females experienced significantly higher levels of stress than males.

Academic factors

Agolla & Ongori (2009) A study was conducted to evaluate the stress caused by academic factors among undergraduate students at the University of Botswana. The

study found that heavy academic workload, insufficient resources, low motivation, ongoing low academic performance, overcrowded classrooms, and concerns about securing a job after graduation contribute to student stress.

Personal factors

Kumar et al., (2019) discovered that the pressure of living up to the family's expectations proved to serve as a major stressor for students. Sherina (2004) In their study to determine the prevalence of psychological stress among medical students, they found that leaving one's family and starting anew elsewhere can contribute to stress.

Financial factors

Niemi & Vainiomäki (2006) found that, in addition to personal stressors, financial stressors significantly affect medical students' mental health. Yusoff et al. (2011) found that, apart from academic stressors, parents' income, a financial factor, was a major stressor among Malaysian medical students.

Methodological approaches in studying undergraduate stress

Rathnayake & Ekanayaka (2016) included the DASS-21 in their cross-sectional study questionnaire. Their study aimed to analyze the levels of stress, anxiety, and depression, along with their contributing factors, among Sri Lankan undergraduate nursing students. Walsh et al. (2010)In their study investigating the sources of stress, psychological issues, and potential links among students following a bachelor's degree in physiotherapy, they used the Undergraduate Sources of Stress Questionnaire to identify stressors. Surulivel et al. (2014) Conducted a study using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) to examine levels of stress among female employees of Indian business process outsourcing (BPO) companies. A survey questionnaire has been used to gather data. This study found that employees are experiencing increased stress due to the organization's physical and psychological work environments. Deng et al. (2022) explored how academic and stress from familial relationships affect students' levels of depression and, in turn, their performance in the academic front, using Lazarus' cognitive appraisal theory of stress as a guiding framework. They employed SEM as the methodological approach to analyze the interrelationships among academic performance, stress, and depression.

Materials and Methods

The population under study comprises all law undergraduates at public and private higher education providers in the Colombo district. The target population for this study included second- and third-year undergraduates at the Faculty of Law, University of Colombo (UOC), and second and third-year undergraduates studying Law at the Royal Institute of Colombo (RIC). The population size (N) is 799, which was rounded up to 800 to determine the sample size from the Krejcie and Morgan table (Krejcie & Morgan, 1970). Accordingly, the sample size (n) was 260, and the sample was drawn using stratified sampling. To ensure that undergraduates from both entities were equally represented, data were collected from 130 respondents from each educational institution. Primary data were utilized in this study to compare two cohorts of undergraduates from selected private and public universities regarding their stress levels and factors influencing stress. Data were obtained from undergraduate law

students at the Faculty of Law, University of Colombo, and the Royal Institute of Colombo. This study used a comprehensive questionnaire as the primary research instrument that contained seven stress statements from the Depression Anxiety Stress Scale-21 (DASS-21) to measure the stress levels in respondents, and the Undergraduate Sources of Stress Questionnaire containing eighteen factors under three categories: Financial, Personal, and Academic, to identify the factors affecting stress.

This research study aimed to compare stress levels between two groups of undergraduates and examine the factors affecting their stress. The level of stress in law undergraduates in the two cohorts under consideration was treated as the dependent variable, and the independent variables were financial, personal, and academic factors. The following diagram illustrates it;
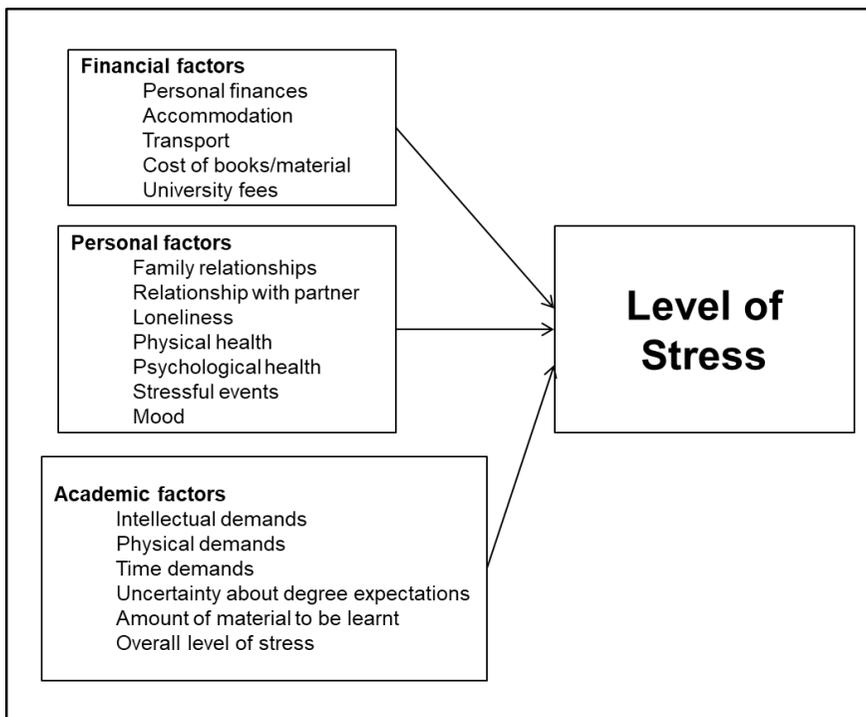

Figure 1. Conceptual framework of the study
Source: Constructed by the Researcher based on study data, 2024

The study employs descriptive statistics to elucidate the fundamental characteristics of the data, serving as the basis for quantitative analysis. In examining single variables among the undergraduates, descriptive statistics and graphical analyses were employed. For advanced statistical analysis, Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) with the Partial Least Squares (PLS) Algorithm was employed. An overall model is developed incorporating all students (both public and private university law undergraduates). This is followed by constructing two separate models—one for public university undergraduates and one for private university undergraduates. The SEM-PLS algorithm is employed to analyze these models, allowing for the identification of latent constructs (academic, financial, and personal factors) and their impact on stress. Bootstrapping is used to assess the statistical significance of path coefficients in the models, providing

insights into differences in causal factors between the two groups. A composite model that includes all students is constructed to analyze and compare stress levels between the two cohorts. The bootstrapping technique is applied to the overall model to identify notable differences in stress levels between public and private university students, enabling a direct comparison. Evaluation criteria for the models include reliability and validity using Cronbach's alpha, Composite reliability (Rho_c), and Average Variance Extracted (AVE), discriminant validity, outer loadings, variance inflation factors, goodness of fit, and path coefficients.

Results and Discussion

The descriptive analysis of the study reveals that a considerable proportion of undergraduates in the two groups selected from the University of Colombo (UOC) and the Royal Institute of Colombo (RIC) were female, constituting 72% at UOC and 82% at RIC. Five performance levels were used to determine the level of English literacy: Excellent, Very good, Good, Fair, and Poor; 74 students of RIC were found to have 'Excellent' literacy in the English language, while 59 students from UOC were found to fall in the 'Good' category. As academics play a major role in the stress levels of undergraduates, a marks threshold was used to assess their academic performance, and the majority of them from both groups fell into the 60-69% marks category for their respective study modules. The majority of students from the RIC were from households with a monthly income exceeding 200,000 LKR. In contrast, students from UOC were more evenly distributed across income levels, highlighting the economic diversity between the two groups.

The path coefficient from academic factors to stress is 0.131, indicating a positive but statistically nonsignificant association between academic stressors and overall stress among public university students. The t-statistic (1.308) and p-value (0.191) suggest that academic factors do not significantly predict stress levels in this sample. This may indicate that other factors, such as personal or social variables, overshadow academic influences in this context. Alternatively, it might reflect variability in how students perceive and manage academic pressures. The path coefficient for financial factors is -0.066, indicating a negative but statistically nonsignificant relationship with stress. The t-statistic (0.583) and p-value (0.560) suggest that financial stressors are not significant predictors of overall stress in this model. However, the path coefficient for personal factors is 0.568, inferring a strong, statistically significant positive association with stress. The high t-statistic (4.662) and low p-value (0.000) confirm that personal factors are a significant predictor of stress. This highlights the substantial influence of personal stressors, such as health issues, family responsibilities, or interpersonal relationships, on student stress levels. The path coefficient from academic factors to stress is 0.338, indicating a statistically significant and positive association between academic stressors and overall stress among students from the private university. The t-statistic (2.987) and p-value (0.003) suggest that academic factors significantly predict stress levels in this sample. The path coefficient for financial factors is 0.084, indicating a positive but statistically nonsignificant relationship with stress. The t-statistic (0.851) and p-value (0.395) suggest that financial stressors are not significant predictors of overall stress in this model. This may reflect variability in students' perceptions of financial stress, possibly due to differences in socioeconomic status or in the availability of financial aid. The path coefficient for personal factors is 0.375, indicating a strong, statistically significant positive association with stress. The high t-statistic (3.499) and low p-value (0.000) confirm that personal factors are a significant indicator of stress.

The link between academic factors and stress shows a positive path coefficient of 0.125, indicating a weak association. However, the relationship is statistically insignificant, as evidenced by the high p-value (0.225), suggesting that academic stressors do not significantly affect overall stress levels across both types of universities. Financial factors have a negative path coefficient of -0.045, indicating a negligible inverse relationship with stress. However, this association is statistically insignificant, with a high p-value of 0.676, meaning that financial stressors do not contribute significantly to overall stress levels in this combined model. Personal factors show a strong, significant positive relationship with stress, as indicated by a path coefficient of 0.597 and a p-value of 0.000. This observation highlights that personal stressors are the most influential in determining stress levels among law undergraduates in both types of universities.

The type of university is significantly negatively associated with stress, with a path coefficient of -0.265 and a p-value of 0.002. This suggests that attending a private university is associated with lower stress levels than attending a public university. The interaction effects between university type and financial, personal, and academic factors are all statistically insignificant, as indicated by their p-values exceeding 0.05. This indicates that the type of university does not significantly moderate the relationship between these factors and stress. Based on the negative path coefficient for university type (-0.265), it can be concluded that public university undergraduates experience higher levels of stress than those at private universities. The statistical significance of this relationship (p-value = 0.002) reinforces the conclusion that attending a public university is associated with increased stress, potentially due to factors not fully captured in this model. Personal factors emerge as the most significant contributors to stress, highlighting the need for targeted interventions to manage personal stressors across both university types.
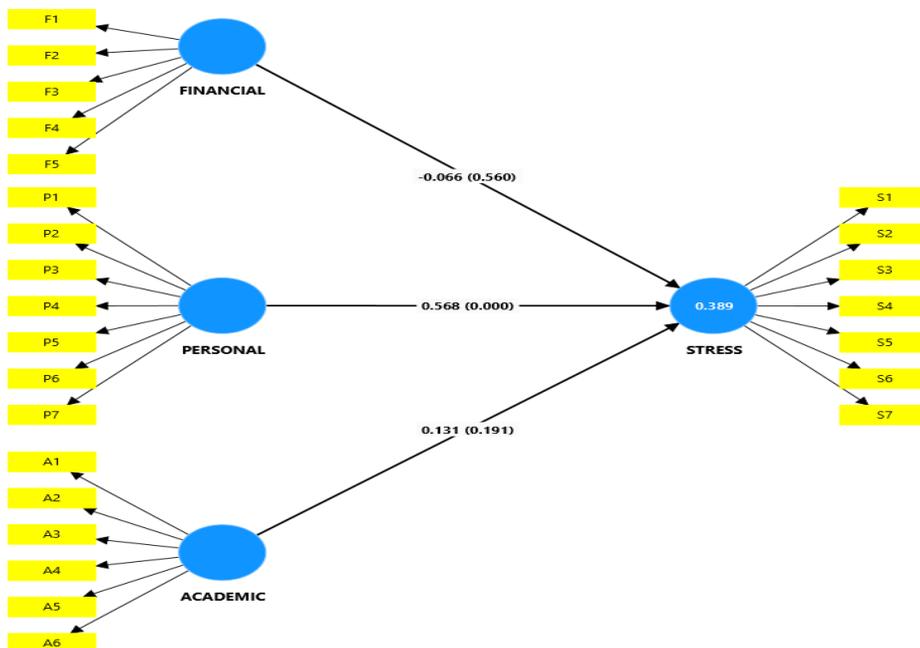

Figure 2. SEM-PLS model for Public University Students
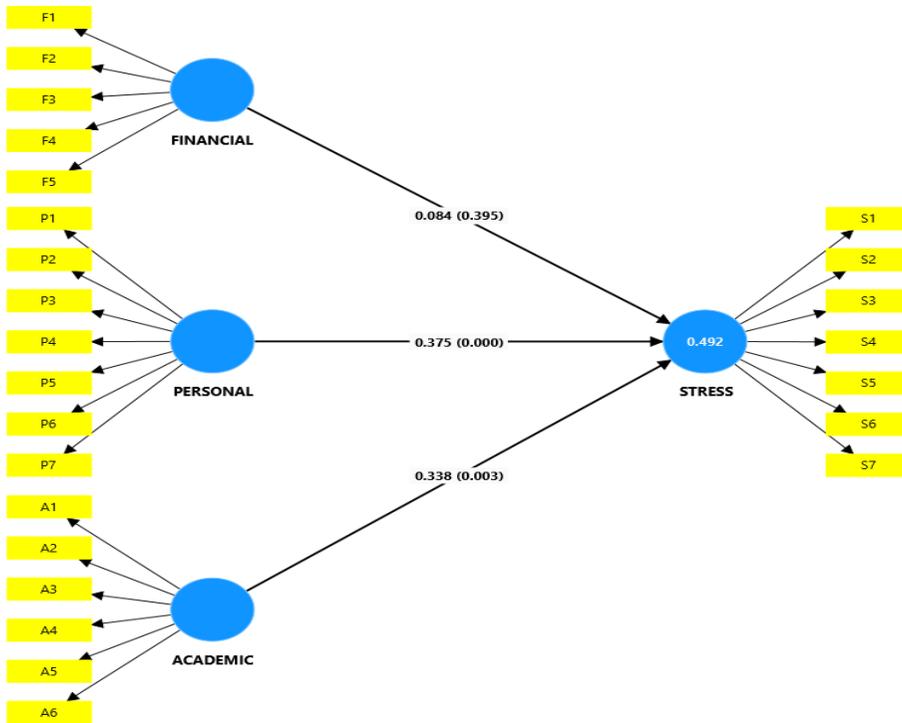*Source: Constructed by the Researcher based on study data, 2024*

Figure 3. SEM-PLS model for Public University Students
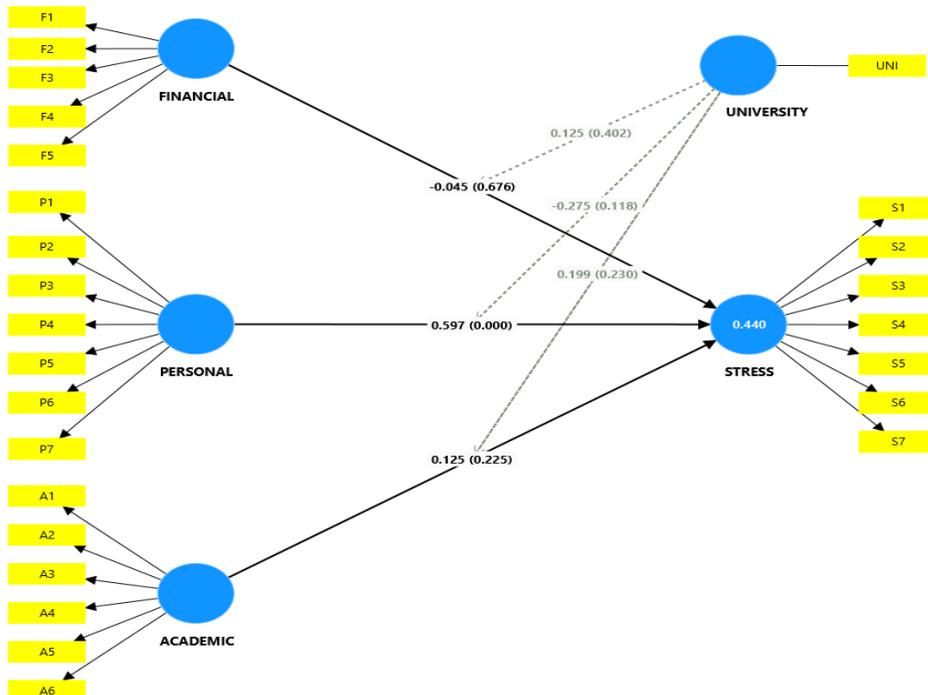*Source: Constructed by the Researcher based on study data, 2024*

Figure 4. SEM-PLS Graphical Output for the Level of Stress between the Universities
Source: Constructed by the Researcher based on study data, 2024

Conclusions

This study investigates the stress experienced by law undergraduates at public and private universities, revealing the predominant role of personal variables, such as relationships, physical health, and psychological well-being, in shaping stress levels. These factors significantly outweigh academic or financial pressures. Law students, already burdened with the challenges unique to their field, may face exacerbated stress due to personal issues. The study emphasizes the need for universities to prioritize students' holistic welfare by integrating mental health support into academic life, especially for law students. The research also highlights distinct stress patterns between public and private universities. Public university students experience higher stress levels due to larger class sizes, fewer resources, and heightened competition. In contrast, private university students are more sensitive to academic pressures stemming from rigorous academic standards. This calls for tailored stress-management interventions for each type of institution. In conclusion, the study calls for a comprehensive approach to stress management in law schools, with specific recommendations to enhance support systems at both public and private universities. By addressing personal, academic, and institutional stressors, universities can foster a more supportive atmosphere that promotes both academic success and personal well-being. Further research could explore these dynamics in different cultural and educational contexts.

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