

Gender Variations in Coping Strategies for Challenges Faced by University Students

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The present study endeavors to cast a glance at gender differences in university students' coping strategies. For young people, stepping into university represents a time of transformation. Students experience this phase, encounter a wide variety of new challenges, and suffer several psychosocial and mental health problems. To address issues and make an effort to overcome challenges, university students use different strategies for coping. In this study, challenges were identified through open-ended questions, and coping strategies were assessed through a brief COPE inventory (Carver, 1997). A total of 50 undergraduate students were selected from a state university through purposeful sampling. Interesting findings showed that there were considerable gender disparities in terms of coping strategies. Further analysis was done domain-wise by using the mean, standard deviation, and t-test, and strong gender differences emerged in five domains: humor, emotional support, venting, instrumental support, and religion. This study would act as a base to plan interventions in universities for developing adaptive coping strategies in students.

Key Words-Challenges, Coping Strategies and University students.

Introduction

University students have become a prominent target audience for many research studies during the past few decades. Enrollment in a university is a significant transition for young people and comes with new responsibilities that some students may not be prepared to handle. Many first-year students find it difficult to juggle their social life, academic duties, time with family, and experiences with new people.

Gaining the autonomy to make choices on their own about their life and the educational process, adapting the rigorous curriculum to a classroom without structure, and communicating with an extensive variety of individuals are just a few of the challenges learners encounter during this phase of development. Several learners are required to decide to leave their hometowns and, often for the first time, separate themselves from their community of supporters.

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Some probable challenges encountered by university students include settling into university life, the feeling of missing homes or home sickness, influence from peer groups, management of time, stability in finance or money management, stress associated with education, an upsurge in competition, poor sleep patterns, problems associated with health (physical and mental health), a lack of confidence, etc.

The challenges and issues that students face on a daily basis have intensified as a result of changes in social, economic, family, and demographic variables. As a result, they become more susceptible to a variety of psychosocial issues and may experience low self-esteem, which can lead to more stress. Individuals gradually come to prefer particular coping mechanisms for handling stress and change.

According to Snyder, Ford, and Harris (1987), "coping" is a method intended to alleviate the physiological, psychological, and emotional strain triggered by stressful circumstances in life.

The concept of "coping" refers to continuously altering behavioral and cognitive initiatives to effectively handle (that is, master, tolerate, reduce, or minimize) certain demands from both the outside and the inside

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(and disputes between them) that are thought to be challenging or beyond the capabilities of an individual (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Folkman and Lazarus (1984) proposed two behavioral patterns of coping: “problem-focused” and “emotion-focused”. Some behaviors, like deliberate solving of problems, are actions meant to reduce or eliminate the component of stress and are referred to as problem-focused coping. In contrast, emotionally oriented coping involves measures employed to avoid, diminish, or decrease the psychological suffering caused by stressful circumstances. This includes actions like distancing, accepting responsibilities, avoiding or evading, and positive self-evaluation. Parker and Endler (1990) promoted the establishment of another kind of coping mechanism termed the avoidant coping strategy, which put the emphasis on averting adverse circumstances by asking for help from other individuals and by engaging in other kinds of activities.

As a reaction to challenging emotions and events, coping serves as a technique for regaining control over one’s surroundings. Students employ a variety of coping mechanisms to manage stress, which can be either positive or negative. Lack of coping skills negatively impacts wellness and leads to disorders and problems with both physical and mental well-being. Stress is reduced or controlled by coping mechanisms. Socioeconomic, societal, and ethnic backgrounds may have an impact on a person’s coping processes and techniques. Among coping strategies, students employ “active coping, self-distraction, denial, humor, planning, behavioral disengagement, substance abuse, venting, emotional assistance or support, self-blame, religion, positive reframing, instrumental assistance or support, and acceptance.”.

According to Carver (1997), problem-focused approaches include “planning, instrumental support, and active coping.” While emotional-oriented techniques include “humor, positive reframing, emotional assistance or help, acceptance, and religion,” “venting, “substance addiction or use, “denial, “self-blame, “behavioral disengagement,” and “self-distraction” are the maladaptive or inadequate methods of coping (Garcia et al. 2018).

A study (Graves et al., 2021) was conducted to assess gender differences in strategies for coping used by college students and reported gender variations in coping strategies and dimensions. The employment of four coping techniques (venting, instrumental assistance

or support, self-distraction, and emotional assistance or support) and agreement with emotion-oriented coping were found to be more common among females than males.

On the other hand, no significant gender disparities in coping strategies were found by Gupta et al. (2021) in their study of Indians living in urban areas during the COVID-19 epidemic.

Acharya et al. (2016) investigated a study on undergraduate students in an Indian state (Himachal Pradesh) and found that “acceptance, positive reframing, religion, active coping, self-distraction, and planning” were the most commonly utilized techniques for coping. The less frequently utilized coping techniques were “substance abuse, denial, and venting.”.

Matud (2004) investigated how men and women cope with stress and concluded that, generally, women’s coping styles are more emotion-focused than men’s.

Numerous other research studies (Endler and Parker, 1990; Matud, 2004; Ptacek et al., 1994) have shown that women usually use coping strategies geared toward modifying their emotional reactions to stressful situations, whereas men often use more problem-focused or instrumental coping strategies.

Based on the review of literature discussed above, it was determined that results have been inconsistent, which makes it challenging to arrive at certain judgments on gender differences in coping techniques for facing different challenges in university. Thus, the primary purpose of this research is to evaluate gender disparities in strategies for coping with challenges faced by university students.

Objectives

1. To identify the different types of challenges faced by first-year undergraduate university students across gender.
2. To find out the different types of coping strategies used to face the challenges by first-year undergraduate university students across gender.

Hypotheses

1. Mode of teaching, Peers, administration-related issues, and means of transport to university would be the major types of challenges faced by first-year undergraduate university students across genders.

2. Males would be higher in Active Coping, Humor, Self-Distraction, Planning, Behavioral Disengagement, Substance use, and Denial strategies for Coping as compared to females among first-year undergraduate university students.

3. Females would be higher in Venting, Emotional support, Self-blame, Positive reframing, Instrumental support, religion, and Acceptance strategies for Coping as compared to males among first-year undergraduate university students.

Method

Sample: The sample of the study included 50 undergraduate students in BA first year (25 males and 25 females) who were selected from the state university. Their ages ranged from 18 to 20 years old, and they were pursuing graduation.

Measures and Statistical analysis used

1. Prior to the study, an informal conversation was held to build rapport with the students and get an idea of the types of problems they encounter at the university. On the basis of this, an open-ended question was framed to identify the challenges faced by university students. An open-ended question was asked “*What were the challenges you faced when you entered the university? Name them.*”

For this open-ended question qualitative method was used and students’ responses was analyzed through content analysis.

2. In order to assess coping mechanisms, the **Brief COPE Inventory** by Carver, 1997, a Likert scale with 4 points from “1”: “not doing at all” to “4”: “doing this a lot, and a total of twenty-eight items and fourteen coping methods made up of two questions each, was used. “. 14 coping methods were Active coping, Humor, Self-distraction, Planning, Behavioral disengagement, Substance use, Denial, Venting, Emotional support, Self-blame, Positive reframing, Instrumental support, Religion, and Acceptance.

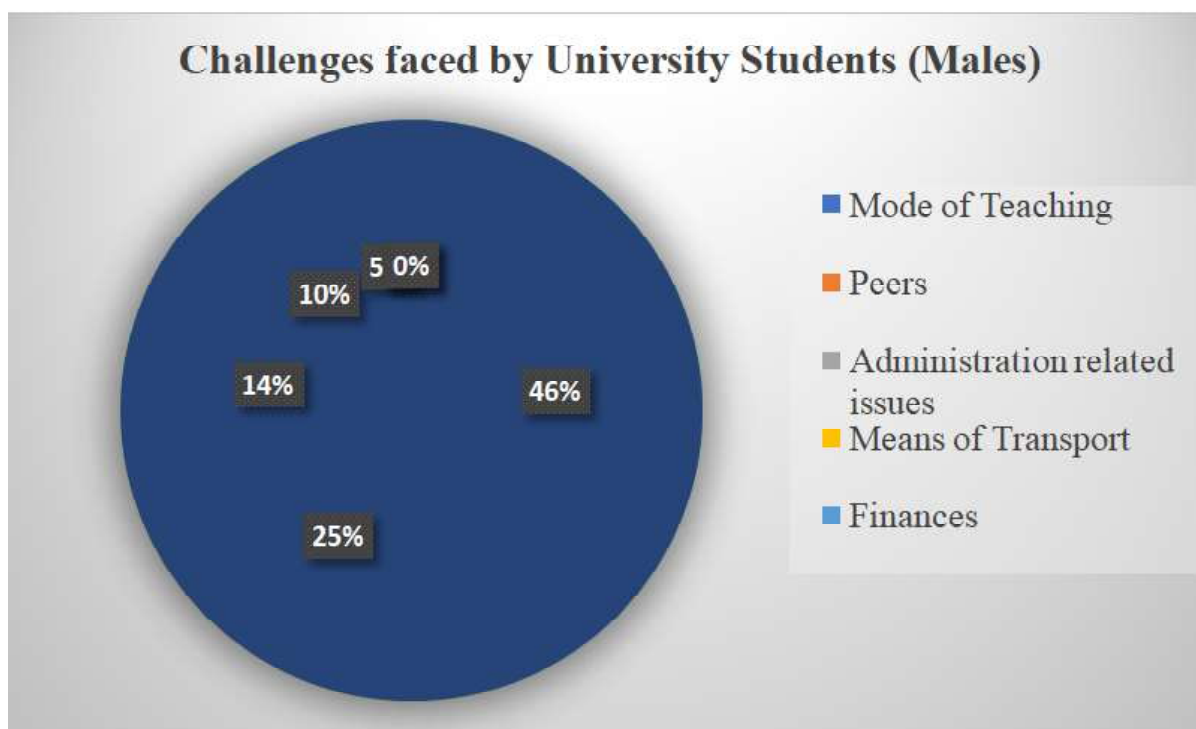
For Coping techniques quantitative analysis was done by descriptive, means and standard deviation.

Results

The obtained data was analyzed, and the findings of the open-ended question are presented first, followed by the descriptive and differential statistical analysis of the coping strategies data.

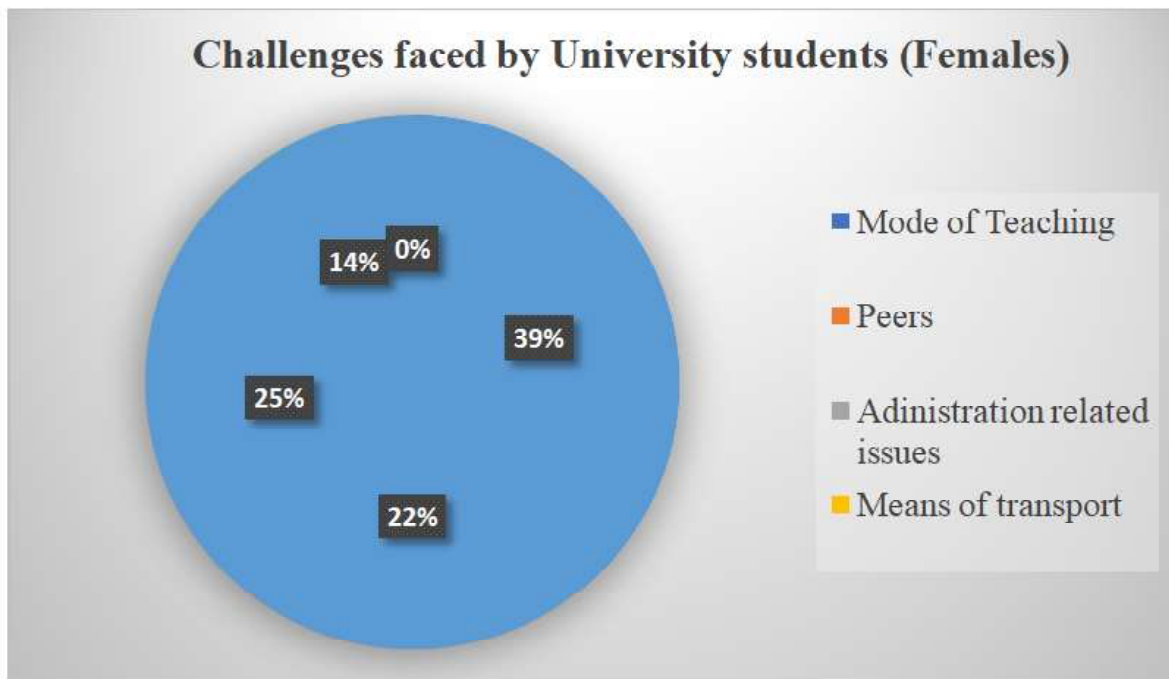
The identifying challenges encountered by university students open ended question was asked from the first-year undergraduate students. The following pie charts showed the findings of major challenges faced by male (chart 1) and female (chart 2) students, respectively.

Chart 1: Showing Challenges faced by Male first-year undergraduate university students



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Chart 2: Showing Challenges faced by Female first-year undergraduate university students



The following **table 1** showed the findings of fourteen strategies for coping used by male and female students:

Table 1:
Showing Mean, SD and t-test on dimensions of coping strategies in Male and Female first-year undergraduate university students

Coping Strategies	Male		Female		Sed	T
	Means	SD	Means	SD		
Active Coping	6.16	1.62	6.20	1.29	0.415	0.0964
Humor	4.44	1.39	3.56	1.61	0.425	2.0711 *
Self-Distracton	4.96	1.70	5.68	1.60	0.466	1.5444
Planning	5.40	1.50	6.12	1.20	0.384	1.8732
Behavioral Disengagement	4.04	1.62	3.36	1.41	0.430	1.5830**
Substance Use	2.20	0.58	2.20	0.71	0.183	0.0000
Denial	4.32	1.57	3.84	1.65	0.456	1.0525
Venting	4.60	1.44	5.68	0.90	0.340	3.1746**
Emotional Assistance/ Support	4.72	1.74	5.88	1.20	0.424	2.7382**
Self- Blame	4.56	1.80	4.52	1.71	0.497	0.0804
Positive Reframing	5.56	1.92	6.08	1.80	0.526	0.9886
Instrumental Assistance/ support	4.72	1.51	6.08	1.04	0.367	3.7042**
Religion	5.16	1.82	6.36	1.25	0.442	2.7161**
Acceptance	6.04	1.54	5.68	1.65	0.452	0.7971

Note: *P < 0.05, **P < 0.01

On 14 coping strategies, the independent sample t test was employed to determine gender differences in the use of coping strategies. The five strategies for coping with a gender difference that was statistically significant ($P < 0.05$) were: “Humor, Emotional support, venting, Instrumental support, and Religion” (Table 1). Other coping techniques, namely, Active coping, Planning, Self-Distracton, Denial, Behavioral disengagement, Substance abuse, Positive reframing, Self-blame, and acceptance, failed to achieve statistically significant results ($P > 0.05$).

Discussion

The intention of this research was to investigate how university students’ coping mechanisms for facing different challenges varied by gender. Different coping mechanisms were used by students to face the challenges of university and to lessen or manage distress.

After establishing proper rapport with undergraduate students, an open-ended question was asked: “What were the challenges you faced when you entered the university? Name them.”. Students’ subjective responses were analyzed through content analysis. As mentioned in pie chart 1, majorly five categories of challenges emerged by undergraduate male students: mode of teaching (46%, peers (25%, administration-related issues (14%, Means of transport (10%), and finances (5%). In expressing mode of teaching (46%) as a challenge, male undergraduate students’ verbatims were: “I have problems with some teachers’ teaching methods”, “some teachers only provide notes, which is challenging for me”, “University meinkuch teachers books se bas read karkepadhatehai”, “I always face the language problem in classrooms,” “kuch teachers dhang se padhatehai but kuch teachers kepadhane ka tareeka bahut bekarhai,” “Kuch teachers sirf English me padhatehailekinmai hu to mughe bahut problem hotihaihai,” etc. The study conducted by Fook and Sidhu (2015) confirmed the results mentioned above that language barriers and instructional issues are two of the biggest learning obstacles experienced by students. Male students expressed the problem of Peers (25%) verbatim: “Few friends always demotivate me for my efforts in life”, “Kuch classmates aksarhame force kartehai class bunk aur time waste karnekeliye,” and “Kabhi kabhi peer pressure ki vajah se mane bahut galatkamkiyehai,” etc. Verbatims of male students that also suggested that administration-related issues (14%) as a challenge in university were

“We always face the problem in submitting any forms like examination forms”, “We didn’t get the proper information about official notices about the exams and fees” and “jab bhi ham koi form submit karnejaatehai, and tab hameshahamlog ko line meinlagnapadtajiskivajah se bahut time waste hotahai”. In the challenge of means of transport (10%) to university, students reported verbatim, “I come to university with the bus, so in the bus sometimes I face many issues” and “Mughebarabanki se aanapadta jo mere liy bahut problematic hai”. Male students also reported that they face the challenges of Finances (5%): “I always suffer with the financial stability in university”, “I have problems dealing with the finances of university fees, hostel fees, and food as I am not from a rich family”. Ewing (2021) and Hotez (2021) also reported finance (budget) or financial struggles as a challenge faced by university students.

However, pie chart 2 showed female undergraduate students faced mostly four categories of challenges in university: mode of teaching (39%, peers (22%, administration-related issues (25% and Means of transport (14%). In mode of teaching (39%) female students reported with verbatims “Some teachers in university teach through online available sites which is not sufficient for good grades”, “Some teachers only teach in proper hindi which is challenging for me for understanding typical hindi terms”, “I am international student and so I have to deal with the problem of language in the classroom”, “Ab teachers is department mein dhang se nahipadhatehai” and “Mughe is department mein problem hotihaikuch teachers kepadhaneke method se” also indicated by study by Fook and Sidhu (2015). The challenge of Peers (22%) faced by females is supported by verbatims given by students: “Some girls in hostel and classes forced me to give them my things like assignments, clothes, and other stuff,” “female batchmates always judge each other for their clothes or fashion sense, which leads to problems” and “Mughekuch classmates se irritation hotihai”. Female students reported administration-related issues (25%) as a challenge; their verbatims were: “For submitting a single form, we have to run to different offices in the university”, “Proper notice for exams and other events is usually not provided clearly in official websites due to this, we face many problems” and “University mein employees aksar students ke documents khodetehai”. Female undergraduate students also mentioned the challenge of Means of

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transport (14%) to university faced by them; the verbatims were “I live on the border of this city, so I have to face this challenge when I come to university, “Meraghar Lucknow kebaharhai to mughe daily aanejaanemein problem hotihai” and “Mughe university aanemein 2 autos change karnepadte jo mere liy challenging hotahai”.

The above verbatims by male and female undergraduate students clearly explained the categories of challenges faced by university students. Male and female undergraduate students reported that mode of teaching, Peers, administration-related issues, and Means of Transport to university were the challenges faced by them. It also emerged that the challenge of finances was another additional challenge faced by male students. Therefore, the first hypothesis of this study, “Mode of teaching, Peers, administration-related issues, and means of transport to university would be the major types of challenges faced by first-year undergraduate university students across genders, was partially accepted.

As discussed in the results (Table 1), gender differences found in five coping strategies were Humor ($t = 2.0711$), Venting ($t = 3.1746$), Emotional support ($t = 2.7382$), Instrumental support ($t = 3.7042$), and Religion ($t = 3.7042$).

In-depth analyses of the coping strategies listed in Table 1 revealed that Humor coping was more effective ($t = 2.0711$, significant at the 0.05 level) in male undergraduates than in female undergraduates, or that humor as a coping technique was more frequently utilized by males than by females, which was also strongly supported by the observation that male students' mean scores of 4.44 were higher than female students' mean scores of 3.56 with reference to Humor. Humor involves making jokes about it or making mockery of the circumstances. Males performed better than females across humor aspects and styles (Salavera et al. 2020). Jones (2016) also supported the above results that males use more Humor than females. It was seen in different research studies that males use humor as a coping strategy more than females because Men use Humor as a defense mechanism to let out their frustration and deal with the stresses of life. However, other strategies for coping (active coping, Self-Distraction, Planning, Behavioral disengagement, Substance use, and denial) showed no gender variations. These findings were also supported by research by Graves et al. (2021).

Therefore, after summarizing the above results, the second hypothesis of the current study, “Males would be higher in Active Coping, Humor, Self-Distraction, Planning, Behavioral Disengagement, Substance use, and Denial strategies for Coping as compared to females among first-year undergraduate university students,” was also partially accepted.

The use of strategies for coping, including Emotional assistance and support, Venting, Instrumental assistance and support, and religion, has been found to be more commonly used by females than males, as mentioned in Table 1. In the venting strategy for Coping in this research, the results showed that the mean score of females (mean = 5.68) was higher than that of males (mean = 4.60), as determined by the t value ($t = 3.1746$; significant at both 0.01 and 0.05 levels), indicating that females use the venting technique of coping more than males. This method enables the expression of rage and may provide a cathartic release from the symptoms of stressful events in the short term. Venting is regarded as a passive or inadequate coping mechanism that may actually make one's level of stress worse. Research by Graves et al. (2021) supported the current study's findings that females utilize Venting more frequently than males. A male who uses sobbing as a form of venting could feel more uneasy and upset as a result than a female performing the same action (Tamres et al., 2002). Leong et al. (1997) also supported the same result as the current study with reference to Venting. Another Strategy for coping that was also used more by females (mean = 5.88) than males (mean = 4.72), was Emotional assistance or support ($t = 2.7382$, $P = 0.01$). Madhyastha et al. (2014) also determined that female students in medicine in their final year employed Emotional Coping methods and particularly sought out Emotional assistance for dealing with distress. Findings by other researchers also supported the above result. When people, like these students, find themselves in difficult situations, they might try to place the blame somewhere else, either internally or externally. Male students seek less support, though, possibly because they don't have social networks or because they haven't refined these skills (Eisenbarth, 2019). Amin et al. (2019) also supported the gender disparities in the present study by observing that women used more Emotion-focused Coping mechanisms than men. Another coping strategy, Instrumental assistance or support, also showed a significant difference between males and females ($t =$

3.7042, $P < 0.01$); females (mean = 6.08) use instrumental coping more frequently as compared to males (mean = 4.72). Instrumental support has been viewed as a beneficial Support mechanism that has been connected to subjective well-being, such as through listening to or physically helping another person. In accordance with earlier studies (Eisenbarth, 2019; Matud, 2004; Tamres, 2002), women were more likely than men to employ Instrumental assistance as an essential indicator of Coping. Another research study by Graves et al. 202 and Garcia et al. (2018) also validated the present study's finding that women employ Instrumental assistance far more often than men. Additionally, religious coping strategies were also found to be higher ($t = 6.36$, $P = 0.01$ and 0.05 levels) in female students (mean = 6.36) than male students (mean = 5.16). Religion encompasses the practice of praying, meditating, or finding solace in one's religious or spiritual beliefs. Women are shown to have greater religiosity than men and to use religion as a coping mechanism more frequently. Research on gender and religion by Gallup and Lindsay (1999) and Francis (1997) also supported the results that females were typically found to be more religious than males. (Hjelmberg et al., 2013). Combining these results, it was discovered that, compared to males, females utilize more Religion, Instrumental assistance or support, Emotional assistance or support, and Venting. However, no gender difference was found in Positive Reframing, self-blame, or acceptance. Thus, the third hypothesis of this study, "Females would be higher in Venting, Emotional support, Self-blame, Positive reframing, Instrumental support, religion, and Acceptance strategies for Coping as compared to males among first-year undergraduate university students," was partially accepted.

The probable reasons for the above findings for gender differences in strategies for coping (Humor Venting, Emotional assistance or support, Instrumental assistance or support, and Religion) were due to the different experiences with peers and gender-specific parenting of children, which later resulted in gender differences in their ways to cope. According to the frequency and severity of challenges and stresses over time, for instance, coping styles may vary from person to person (Schneiderman et al., 2005). Another study by Jones et al. (2016) also noted a number of noticeable disparities between genders in the techniques for coping used to regulate distress. While the paucity of gender disparities in some other coping styles (Active coping,

Self-distraction, Denial, Planning, Behavioral disengagement, Substance use, Self-blame, Positive reframing, and Acceptance) can possibly be explained by the observation that gender differences have become less pronounced over time or the fact that all respondents were undergraduates who might have had more liberal ideas about what were adequate actions for both men and women (Martnez-Hernández et al. 2016; Dyson & Renk 2006; Matud 2004), The lack of gender differences may be accounted for by the fact that these variations have become less noticeable over time or by the fact that all respondents were undergraduates, who may have had more liberal views on what actions qualified as appropriate for both men and women (Martnez-Hernández et al. 2016; Dyson & Renk 2006; Matud 2004).

Conclusion

Summarizing the above findings, it was discovered that the students face challenges in university related to mode of teaching, peers, administration-related issues, means of transport to university, and the additional challenge of finances. To cope with these challenges, students use different coping techniques. The five Coping strategies "Humor, Emotional support, Venting, Instrumental support, and Religion" showed gender differences: Male students use "Humor" more than female students. Female students use more "Emotional support, Instrumental support, Venting, and Religion" than male students, whereas other Coping strategies such as "Active coping, self-Distraction, planning, behavioral disengagement, substance use, denial, self-blame, positive reframing, and acceptance" showed no gender variations. Therefore, in this study, all three hypotheses were partially accepted.

Educational interventions might be required to help the students develop healthy, productive, and lifelong coping skills. This study provided crucial data, with an emphasis on gender in particular. Classes, especially those for freshmen and/or sophomores, might put more of an emphasis on coping with challenges, stress, and adaptive sessions. This information could also be used to help undergraduate students with gender-specific guidance and future research goals. To safeguard the students' wellbeing in their lectures, faculty and other university administrators might prefer to emphasize and comprehend these numerous variables. However, this study has certain limitations, which include a small sample size, a single behavioral setting, and a measure of coping.

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