# Stress and Avoidant Coping: Predictors of Quality of Life Among Filipino Graduating Students

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**Abstract:** The responsibilities of emerging adulthood and academic pressure are some stressful situations encountered among graduating students. Those graduating students used different coping that deals with stressful situations that may affect their quality of life. This study, a predictive correlational design, was conducted on 202 Filipino graduating university/college students to determine if stress and avoidant coping can predict their quality of life. Results showed a significant relationship existed between stress, avoidant coping, and quality of life. Stepwise forward regression analysis tested two regression models, where model 1 revealed that stress negatively predicted the quality of life. Whereas model 2 suggested that stress and avoidant coping (i.e., behavioral disengagement) was significantly higher in predicting the quality of life among graduating students.

**Keywords:** *Avoidant coping, graduating students, quality of life, stress.*

## Introduction

Many people believe that earning a college degree is vital to success. Higher educational attainment is considered a key to more employment opportunities (Ali & Jalal, 2018). Hence, most individuals place a high value on education as this is perceived as an investment for a brighter future. For college seniors, their last year in university is a crucial time because, in addition to the growing personal and family expectation and academic pressures, they are also in a critical transition period. Many traditionally aged-college students are young adults (Cavanaugh, 2016). Based on the psychosocial development theory of Erikson, young adulthood is a significant period of psychosocial growth of ego identity (McLean & Syed, 2015). It is a period in which they start to evaluate themselves and their preferences. College seniors may experience an uncertainty about life after graduation, which can be anxiety-provoking (Belle et al., 2022). Moreover, according to Radovanovic et al. (2017), fear of uncertainty lowers a person's quality of life. As a result, these situations could affect students' psychological health, leading to stress.

In the Philippines, new graduates struggle to find a job due to the competitive job market and lack of required skills needed in the workplace (Toquero & Ulanday, 2021). Hence, transitioning from college to the professional world has always been challenging for some students (Escoto et al., 2022). Moreover, the pandemic has made it even more challenging for graduating students to achieve significant milestones in their life. A previous study found that because of the pandemic Filipino college students did not experience developmental and academic milestones such as face-to-face collaborative learning, leisure activities with peers, an internship with their desired companies, and the preparation they need in the workforce were deprived (Cleofas, 2021). Thus, the disruptions made by the pandemic to the lives of college students may lead to a decrease in their quality of life (Egcas et al., 2021).

Graduating students face pressure and responsibilities as they prepare to enter the workforce. This time, they tend to be stressed and experience anxiety (Rith-Najarian et al., 2019). Several studies identified that physical and mental health

decline could cause adverse effects on the quality of life and stress among university students. Physical exhaustion, such as lack of sleep and burnout, can also increase the stress level of university students, thus decreasing their quality of life (Ribeiro et al., 2018; Seib et al., 2014; Seo et al., 2018). Using coping strategies that are adaptive and used properly can positively improve the quality of life, even if under stressful situations (Palmes et al., 2021). Moreover, Vervoordt et al. (2022) reported that various coping strategies had diverse effects on quality of life.

Students with high-stress levels prefer avoidance coping strategies in dealing with stressful situations (Thai et al., 2021). Haider et al. (2022) reported that avoidant coping harms the quality of life. On the other hand, numerous studies confirm that stress and avoidant coping influence an individual's quality of life (Ravindran et al., 2019). Moreover, the use of avoidance coping and emotion-related coping among university students might result in a poorer mood and decrease or increase the quality of life daily (Shermeyer et al., 2019). Rodríguez-Pérez et al. (2017) revealed that higher levels of avoidant coping were linked with a noticeably worse overall quality of life and trouble functioning, which led to emotional issues and subsequently lowered quality of life.

The Transactional Model of Stress and Coping by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) supports this study and emphasizes that coping behaviors and stress affect an individual's life and mental health outcomes. According to Kupcewicz et al. (2020), when positive coping techniques are correctly applied, they can probably enhance the quality of life of an individual, even in stressful circumstances. A previous study found that stress and maladaptive coping can reduce the quality of life (Ravindran et al., 2019). Therefore, this present study aims to provide evidence that stress and avoidant coping have a beneficial or detrimental impact on quality of life. This study intends to show that stress, avoidant coping, and quality of life are significantly related. Furthermore, this study aims to determine if stress and avoidant coping are significant predictors of quality of life.

## Methodology

### Design & Participants

This study utilized a predictive correlational research design which aimed to predict the association between the predictor variables (i.e., stress and avoidant coping) and the outcome variable (i.e., quality of life). Moreover, we used purposive sampling method with 202 Filipino graduating students presently enrolled from different universities/colleges in Manila, Philippines from which 63 (27.75%) are males and 164 (72.25%) are females with ages ranging from 20 to 24 ($M = 22.07$, $SD = 0.73$).

### Research Instruments

Perceived Stress Scale (PSS; Cohen et al., 1983) is a 10-item scale that measures how stressful an individual perceives particular circumstances and aims to assess how unpredictable, unmanageable, and overburdened the individual in their life (e.g., "In the last month, how often have you found that you could not cope with all the things that you had to do?") with responses rated on a 5-point Likert scale (0 = never to 4 = very often). The PSS demonstrated high concurrent validity. It was strongly connected with measures of anxiety and depression in adults, university students, and adolescents (Lee, 2012; Liu et al., 2020). The scale was locally validated among Filipino undergraduate students with a Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.83$ (Klainin-Yobas, et al., 2021). In this study, the scale demonstrated an internal consistency reliability, with Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.85$.

Brief Coping Orientation to Problems Experienced (COPE) Inventory (Carver et al., 1989) is a 28-items scale that measures and determines which coping strategies an individual uses. This tool is a 4-point Likert scale format wherein (0 = I haven't been doing this at all to 3 = I've been doing this a lot). This measure has 14 subscales and was under the 3 factors (i.e., problem-focused coping; emotion-focused coping; and avoidant coping) with at least 2 items each. The scale was locally validated among Filipino university students with Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.70$, which indicates a good internal consistency (Serrano et al., 2022). However, this study would specifically use the results of the scales under avoidant copings, such as self-distraction, denial, substance use, and behavioral disengagement with internal consistency reliability yielded Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.79$. On the other hand, internal consistency reliability for the total test items resulted in Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.81$.

The Quality of Life Scale (QOLS; Burckhardt & Anderson, 2003) is a 16-item scale with six conceptual domains of quality of life (i.e., material and physical well-being; relationships with other people; social, community, and civic activities; personal development and fulfillment; recreation; and independence) with a seven-point Likert scale ranging (1 = terrible to 7 = delighted). The scores can range from 16 to 112, which determines the total score by adding all the scores from each item. High scores indicate better quality of life. A high quality of life for healthy individuals with no chronic illness is reported by scores greater than 90, whereas a poor quality of life is indicated by scores less than 90. In this study, internal consistency reliability yielded Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.87$.

*Data Procedure and Analysis*

We obtained approval from the University Research Ethics Committee and informed consent from the participants. Afterwards, we distributed a Google form link to the graduating students from different colleges and universities in Manila with the following sequence of questionnaires: PSS, COPE, and QOLS.

The collected data was analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS ver. 29). Multiple Correlation Coefficient was used to determine the relationship between the variables. Then, Multiple Linear Regression is also used to know the predictive relationship between stress and avoidant coping on quality of life. Furthermore, using Harman's Single Factor Test, the scales used in this study showed that common method bias is not an issue with a variance of 19%. Moreover, the following assumption checks were also analyzed. First, the variance inflation factor on collinearity statistics showed scores below 10. Secondly, the Shapiro-Wilk test on normality test showed that the data gathered does not have a normal distribution. Despite this result, a large number of participants took part in this study. Lastly, no outliers were shown in this study.

## Results

The results of multiple correlations between the variables showed that stress, avoidant coping, and quality of life are significantly related, which are presented in Table 1.

*Table 1. Descriptive Statistics and Correlations of Stress, Avoidant Coping, and Quality of Life*

|  | M | SD | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 Stress (PSS) | 22.55 | 5.72 | - |  |  |  |  |  |
| Avoidant Coping (COPE) |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 2 Self-Distraction | 6.19 | 1.23 | .33** | - |  |  |  |  |
| 3 Denial | 3.31 | 1.33 | .24** | .07 | - |  |  |  |
| 4 Substance Use | 3.14 | 1.72 | .23** | .05 | .25** | - |  |  |
| 5 Behavioral Disengagement | 3.81 | 1.47 | .38** | .11 | .49** | .13 | - |  |
| 6 Quality of Life (QOLS) | 78.96 | 12.61 | -.39** | .05 | -.22** | -.22** | -.31** | - |

n = 202, **p < .01

A significant positive correlation existed between stress and self-distraction (r = .33, p < .01), denial (r = .24, p < .01), substance use (r = .23, p < .01), and behavioral disengagement (r = .38, p < .01). Significant negative correlation existed between stress and quality of life (r = -.39, p < .01), quality of life and denial (r = -.22, p < .01), substance use (r = -.22, p < .01), and behavioral disengagement (r = -.31 p < .01).

The results of multiple regression analysis testing two stepwise regression models, which determine if stress and avoidant coping (i.e., denial, substance use, and behavioral disengagement) are significant predictors of the quality of life, were presented in Table 2.

*Table 2. Stepwise Forward Regression analysis for Quality of Life*

| Variable | B | 95%CI | | SE B | β | $R^2$ | $\Delta R^2$ |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
|  |  | LL | UL |  |  |  |  |
| **Model 1** |  |  |  |  |  | .15 | .15*** |
| Constant | 98.14*** | 91.54 | 104.74 | 3.35 |  |  |  |
| Stress | -.851*** | -1.13 | -0.57 | .14 | -.39*** |  |  |
| **Model 2** |  |  |  |  |  | .20 | .05** |
| Constant | 102.67*** | 95.60 | 109.73 | 3.58 |  |  |  |
| Stress | -0.63*** | -0.93 | -0.32 | .16 | -.29*** |  |  |
| Denial | -0.44 | -1.84 | 0.96 | .71 | -.04 |  |  |
| Substance Use | -0.92 | -1.89 | 0.05 | .49 | -.13 |  |  |
| Behavioral Disengagement | -1.37* | -2.67 | 0.06 | .66 | -.16* |  |  |

CI = confidence Interval; LL = lower limit; UL = upper limit; ***p < .001, **p < .01, *p < .05.

In model 1, the ($R^2$ = .15) revealed that stress explained 15% of the variance of quality of life with $F$ (1, 200) = 34.98, p < 0.001. The findings revealed that stress (β = -.39, p < .001) negatively associated with quality of life. In model 2, the ($R^2$ = .20) revealed that the stress and avoidant coping (i.e., denial, substance use, behavioral disengagement) explained 20% variance in the quality of life with $F$ (4, 197) = 12.08, p < .001. The findings revealed that stress (β = -.29, p < .001) and behavioral disengagement (β = -.16, p < .05) negatively associated with quality of life. The ($\Delta R^2$ = .05) revealed 5% chance in the variance of model 1 and model 2 with $\Delta F$ (3, 197) = 3.94, p < .001.

## Discussion

This present study investigated the relationship among the variables and if stress and avoidant coping predicted the quality of life among graduating students. The results suggested a significant positive relationship existed between stress and avoidant coping (i.e., self-distraction, denial, substance use, and behavioral disengagement). It implicated that the higher the perceived stress of graduating students, the possibility of increase in the usage of these avoidant coping strategies. Consistent with a previous study on stress and avoidant coping, it was found that students with high perceived stress levels are more likely to use avoidant coping (Thai et al., 2021). Other previous studies discussed that using avoidant coping is associated with higher perceived stress rates among students (Furman et al., 2018; Goldman, 2021). On the other hand, results showed a significant negative relationship existed between stress, avoidant coping (i.e., denial, substance use, and behavioral disengagement), and quality of life. The results implicated that graduating students' quality of life decreases when perceived stress increases; this showed that stress negatively impacts their quality of life. Graduating students feel pressured since they are in the crucial period of transitioning into adulthood, which can be stressful and may result in decreased quality of life. The obtained findings are consistent with previous studies suggested that stress has a negative relationship with quality of life (Ayala et al., 2017; Ribeiro et al., 2018). Also, a previous local study indicated that the quality of life of Filipino students has a negative association with stress (Berdida & Grande, 2023). Another implication of this study is that the quality of life decreases when graduating students use avoidant coping, such as denial, substance use, and behavioral disengagement. Previous studies discussed that avoidant coping and quality of life are negatively correlated and showed that individuals with lower quality of life used avoidance coping strategies than individuals with high quality of life (Rodríguez-Pérez et al., 2017; Roming & Howard, 2019).

Results of this study showed that stress, avoidant coping (i.e., denial, substance use, and behavioral disengagement), and quality of life has a significant relationship. Therefore, this study used two models' stepwise regression analysis to determine if stress and avoidant coping are substantial predictors of quality of life. Model 1 showed that stress has a negative association with quality of life. The amount of stress experienced by the graduating students affects their quality of life which may improve or worsen their condition. Cleofas et al. (2023) reported that whenever the academic stress of Filipino students was excessively high, their quality of life was affected. In addition, this finding is supported by a previous study where the quality of life of university students has been negatively affected by their elevated level of perceived stress, which enables them to become prone to possible health problems (Seo et al., 2018). Moreover, the perceived stress among the student includes examinations, several tasks, job preparations, and other stressors which are involved in decreasing the quality of life, which may as well result in possible negative implications such as inability to perform well and have better learning or worse unable to attain goals (Alomar et al., 2021).

Afterward, Model 2 suggested that stress combined with avoidant coping (i.e., behavioral disengagement) was significantly higher in predicting the quality of life. It implicated that those graduating students with high perceived stress and then used behavioral disengagement as a coping strategy, there is a possibility that their quality of life decreases. This finding was supported by a previous study which indicated that the student's quality of life, particularly their mental health worsened as they had prolonged exposure to heightened stress and used more maladaptive coping strategies such as avoidant coping (Hirsch et al., 2020). Also, a previous study suggested that using avoidant coping mechanisms together with the occurrence of different stress and challenges from academics was reported to have negative implications on the student's quality of life (Abouammoh et al., 2020). Meanwhile, the results of this study showed that the other avoidant coping (i.e., denial and substance use) were not associated with predicting the quality of life among the graduating students.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, there is a significant relationship existed between stress, avoidant coping, and quality of life. Furthermore, stress alone negatively predicted quality of life. Moreover, stress combined with behavioral disengagement, an avoidant coping strategy, showed higher negative prediction on the quality of life. However, avoidant coping (i.e., denial and substance use) and quality of life were significantly related; these coping strategies do not associate with predicting quality of life among graduating students.

## Recommendations

As a recommendation, this present study can be utilized by future researchers addressing the impact of stress and avoidant coping on students' quality of life. Therefore, this study can be a basis for providing intervention programs that will help students deal with stress, such as the Multiple Stress Management Intervention (MSMI) by Chinaveh et al. (2010). This intervention helps students cope with stress by providing breathing exercises, problem-solving training, etc. These intervention programs will increase the chances that students will have a healthier option for dealing with stress; instead of using avoiding coping as a method to handle stressful situations.

## Limitations

Limitations in this study are acknowledged. This study is limited only to graduating students presently enrolled in selected universities/colleges in Manila, Philippines focuses solely on the Filipino perspective rather than other nationalities. Additionally, graduating students vary in terms of school institutions and their learning culture.

**Authorship Contribution Statement**

Orines: Conceptualization, design, data acquisition, analysis and interpretation, editing/reviewing, final approval. Dy, Maligaya & Paulino: Writing (introduction, results and discussion), data acquisition, analysis and interpretation. Huen: Writing (results, discussion, and conclusion), data acquisition, analysis and interpretation, reviewing. Pangan & Racimo: Writing (introduction, recommendation, and limitations), data acquisition, analysis and interpretation.

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