



**UNIVERSITY OF
KWAZULU-NATAL**

**INYUVESI
YAKWAZULU-NATALI**

**PERCEIVED SOURCES OF STRESS AND COPING AMONG POSTGRADUATE
STUDENTS AT A PRIVATE HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTION IN KWAZULU-
NATAL: A CASE STUDY**

BY

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2024

DECLARATION

I, Daylene Reddy, declare that:

- (i) The research reported in this dissertation/thesis, except where otherwise indicated, is my original work.
- (ii) This thesis has not been submitted for any degree or examination at any other university.
- (iii) This thesis does not contain other persons' data, pictures, graphs or other information, unless specifically acknowledged as being sourced from other persons.
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Signed: 

Daylene Reddy

As the candidate's Supervisor I agree to the submission of this thesis.

Signed:

Dr. Makie Kortjass

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my late uncle, Steve Govender who is greatly missed. He was a person who believed that studying and education played a vital role in the journey to success. I am immensely thankful for his constant encouragement and desire for me to further my studies. He would have indeed been very proud of this achievement.

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PREFACE

The research study described in this dissertation was carried out with eight postgraduate students at a private Higher Education institution in KwaZulu-Natal. This study represents the original work completed by the author and has not been submitted in any form for any diploma or degree to any other tertiary institution. Where the author has made use of the work of other authors, this has been duly acknowledged in the text.

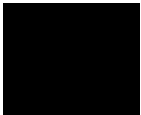


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ABSTRACT

This study sought to explore the perceived sources of stress and coping among postgraduate students at a private Higher Education institution in KwaZulu-Natal. Stress is a significant and relevant issue, particularly among students, as research indicates that they are the demographic most impacted by stress. Students struggle to transition from undergraduate to postgraduate studies and this places stress on them. To cope with stress, students use various coping strategies to alleviate stress that is experienced during their studies. The study explored the ways in which the institution offered support to students who were stressed.

A qualitative, interpretivist, case study design was used in this study. There was a sample size of eight students that were interviewed. The eight students comprised of three males and five females between the ages of 18 to 27 years old. The qualifications that the students were registered for, were the Bachelor of Commerce Honours and Bachelor of Arts Honours. The data was generated from in-depth interviews and document analysis of the policies of the Higher Education institution.

The findings of the study revealed that the stressors experienced by the students were the transition from undergraduate to postgraduate studies, time management, academic stress, difficulty with the research module, pressure to perform well, fear of the future, working and studying, personal life issues, financial issues and living away from family. The findings also highlighted the coping strategies that the postgraduate students used, which were support from family and friends, socialising, avoidance, procrastination, working through it, and physical activities. Additionally, the students recommended that institutions should offer more group sessions for the students to share their experiences, extra-mural activities such as a dancing club, awareness of the library support and referencing workshops, and interaction and relationship-building sessions among students and lecturers.

Keywords: *Stress, Stressor, Coping Strategies, Higher Education institution, Postgraduate students*

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1. CHAPTER 1 - OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

1.1. Introduction

The main purpose of this research is to explore the perceptions of stress and coping among postgraduate students at a private Higher Education institution in KwaZulu-Natal. This chapter discusses the study's background, context, and rationale. It also presents the objectives of the study and outline the research questions this study seeks to answer. I will also explain the significance of the research and the key concepts that have been considered for this study. Lastly, I will provide a brief overview of the structure of the chapters in this thesis.

1.2. Background and Context of the Study

According to Tunc (2020), the university years of a student's life are an important period. As a result, various research within higher education institutions highlight how prevalent stress has become in students' lives. During this period of transition into university, the student attempts to uncover their identity and reveal their potential, but this is also coupled with problems they encounter that add to their stress. The amount of stress that students experience can be influenced by the student's ability to cope with the stressful situations they encounter (Shah et al., 2009). Studies conducted in South Africa revealed that students' stress levels are high and challenge their ability to balance the personal and academic aspects of their lives (van Vuuren et al., 2018).

According to Lazarus and Cohen (1977, p. 20), stress can be defined as "any event in which environmental demands, internal demands, or both, exceed the adaptive resources of an individual or social system." The term *stress* has been used regularly in culture and academic literature, particularly in psychology and education. The concept of stress is dynamic in nature and evolves as time elapses (Mason, 2017). Cevik (2020) describes stress as a reaction to a strain that was caused by an action. These definitions all work on the premise that the individual is exposed to factors which in turn affect how they feel. Whilst some form of stress is required in life, the challenge is when stress becomes excessive and poses a concern to the individual (Veena & Shastri, 2016).

Nieuwoudt (2021) explains that existing research has demonstrated that Higher Education students in South Africa experience a higher level of stress than the general population. Owing to this, stress is widespread within our society, especially for students studying at higher

education institutions and studies related to stress and coping are beneficial to students (Almansoof et al., 2024; Cody et al., 2024). It is important to understand the various factors which contribute to students' stress, particularly in relation to academic, financial, and relational spheres. In modern literature, as numerous stress-related self-help books demonstrate, stress is often considered a sickness, frequently defined as an adverse outcome of an experience (Redhwan et al., 2009).

Stressors themselves do not cause stress. Rather, stressed or caused by students' perceptions of their stressors and their belief in their ability to deal with the situation causing the stressor (Redhwan et al., 2009). Stressors are diverse and, as a result, affect students differently. Some of the factors that influence the type and impact of stressors include the pressure to perform well academically, relationships, and time pressure (Redhwan et al., 2009). This research sought to uncover the stressors that affected students.

Studying at a Higher Education institution is a transformative process that is stressful for students (Nieuwoudt, 2021). Coping strategies are therefore required to assist students as they transition to universities. Coping is defined as the conscious behaviours and mental efforts that a person undertakes to deal with a stressful situation, with the objective to minimise negative consequences (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Owing to the negative impact that stress has on people and their health, individuals engage in coping strategies to deal with the stress they experience (Yikealo & Tareke, 2018). Hence, this proposed research aims to explore the types of stressors that impact students' learning and performance.

One of the main reasons this study is relevant is that students experience stress in various forms during their studies and engage in some type of coping strategy to manage their stress. Many studies have reported that most students in higher education institutions confront different kinds of stress (Shah et al., 2009; Langtree et al., 2018; Yikealo & Tareke, 2018). Hence, there is a need to explore stressors and coping strategies used by postgraduate students from a private Higher Education institution in KwaZulu-Natal. The findings of the research will assist in strengthening the support structures that the institution can offer to the students which will be beneficial to both stakeholders. It will also assist the institution in orientating the postgraduate students into their studies.

1.3. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceived sources of stress and coping strategies among postgraduate students at a private Higher Education institution in KwaZulu-Natal. In addition to this, the study concentrated on the various ways in which the institution offered support to students who were stressed and whether those postgraduate students utilised the support offered to them.

1.4. Rationale/Motivation of the Study

I have retained a Bachelor of Social Science in Psychology. I have also achieved a Postgraduate Certificate in Education, where I completed teaching experience in a secondary school. I then pursued my studies further with a Postgraduate Diploma in Higher Education. My passion for higher education stems from over sixteen years of experience working at a private higher education institution in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. I have a deep-seated zeal for both undergraduate and postgraduate students and their Higher Educational studies.

I have been in constant communication with postgraduate students during my tenure at the private Higher Education institution. Students have expressed their concerns about their stress when they raised their queries with me. Oftentimes, they felt overwhelmed, especially during the assessment periods, as their stress levels were heightened. From my engagement with the students, it was evident that only a few were aware of the support measures established by the institution. They were also unaware of the Assessment Strategy and Policy and the concessions available to them if they were unable to attempt an assessment.

My interest in this research emanated from my years of exposure and interaction with students at various private higher education institutions. I have also experienced stress during my postgraduate studies. I was working full-time while enrolled in my postgraduate studies. My full-time job is demanding in nature, and I found it challenging to negotiate a balance between my work and studies. My experience aligned with the findings of Reddy et al. (2018), which identified various stressors affecting students, including academic stress, exam anxiety, work-related stress, poor time management, and challenges in balancing personal and academic responsibilities. There were various deadlines that needed to be met at work, and I had to attend workshops and lectures for my studies which placed additional stress on me.

In conjunction with being employed full-time and completing postgraduate studies, I also had to ensure that I completed multiple assessments that were due within the academic year. Similarly, my experience of managing work alongside assessment submissions aligns with a qualitative study conducted on both undergraduate and postgraduate students at a public higher education institution in South Africa. This study revealed that students face various stressors, including a heavy workload, inadequate time to complete assessments, multiple formative assessments due simultaneously, financial difficulties, and challenges in accessing resources (Seabi et al., 2014).

During this time, my stress became increasingly more prevalent as the semesters continued. By the second semester, my health began to deteriorate due to the stress that I experienced. I then had to engage in various methods to cope with the stress as it was beginning to have a detrimental effect on my wellbeing. Counselling became vital as a coping strategy. International research reveals a notable increase in physical and mental health challenges among higher education students (Macaskill, 2012; Deasy et al., 2014; Gore et al., 2011). One of the resources offered to students by higher education institutions is counselling. Considering this, one of the recommendations from Akanpaadgi et al.'s (2023) research was that higher education institutions' counselling departments be upskilled to improve their effectiveness.

Knowledge of the Institutional Culture, Student Services and Academic Resource Allocation Policy from the private Higher Education institution, as a resource, may assist in coping with stress if students are aware of the options available to them. Existing policies include information about academic support, as well as counselling services available to all students at this private Higher Education institution. The Academic team offer support workshops to students who require additional assistance prior to assessments taking place. Tutorial sessions are also available to students to assist them in preparing for assessments which may alleviate the stress they experience. Student consultation sessions are offered where students can meet with Academic staff members to explain the areas they are struggling with. Staff members also provide various academic support and counselling options.

The private Higher Education institution also offers non-academic student support services, in the form of six primary counselling sessions with the student wellness managers available on each campus. This information is available in the Institutional Culture, Student Services and Academic Resource Allocation Policy. Counselling services are offered to both undergraduate

and postgraduate students. The study sought to uncover if the postgraduate students made use of the non-academic support, in the form of counselling offered by the institution.

Whilst some research has been conducted nationally regarding stress experienced by students, this study is particularly relevant because there is little South African research on stress among postgraduate students (Tariq et al., 2023). In my study, students have an opportunity to reflect on their coping strategies, and this will have future implications once they are employed. Additionally, this study will also assist the support staff from the institution to incorporate new strategies that will assist students in coping with stress. The findings of the study augment the existing support services available to postgraduate students.

1.5. Problem Statement

A study's *problem statement* provides the researcher with an opportunity to convey their passion for the research context, outline their research plans to address an identified problem, and explain how their findings may impact society (Zhang & Ibarra, 2024). The study's problem statement focuses on the exploration of the perception of stress and coping by postgraduate students at a private Higher Education institution in Durban. The study explored the different types of stressors that postgraduate students were exposed to and the types of coping they used to deal with the stress. Interviews were conducted with the postgraduate students to gain further regarding this research. Transformation in higher education institutions is ongoing, and the support offered to students must be multifaceted (Seabi et al., 2014). The support that is provided will aid with the holistic development of students' Higher Education experience and as such there is a need to conduct a study of this nature.

Very few qualitative studies have been done with a focus on postgraduate students and their relationship to stress. From the existing literature, it is evident that there has not been an adequate focus on postgraduate students in private higher education institutions in South Africa. Some studies have been conducted on postgraduate students internationally (Zegeye, 2018). Moreover, studies that have been conducted are quantitative and not qualitative in nature (Jarvis et al., 2021). Qualitative studies provide the opportunity for students to provide detailed descriptions of their experiences as opposed to statistically oriented quantitative studies. Rockman et al. (2022) is an example of a qualitative study that was conducted in South Africa and the purpose of the study was to explore the experiences and stressors that the postgraduate

students encountered, as well as the coping mechanisms that the students used to help them cope with stress. The study highlighted the common themes of stressors such as burnout, financial issues, and finding a balance between studying and working and proposed a coping mechanism model that institutions could implement (Rockman et al., 2022).

Various studies that have been conducted globally, have focused on student stress but only at an undergraduate level (Yasmin et al., 2024; Ibrahim et al., 2024). These are quantitative global studies that did not focus on postgraduate students. Furthermore, studies conducted in South Africa relating to stress have mainly been conducted with undergraduate students and there was no focus on postgraduate students. van Vuuren et al. (2018) conducted a study relating to stress among third and fourth-year students in South Africa. Similarly, Langtree et al. (2018) conducted a study based on the factors that cause stress to first-year students. Govender et al. (2015) researched undergraduate students' experiences of stress and coping in South Africa. In addition, all the studies were quantitative and excluded postgraduate students. This research study will address previous research gaps by being qualitative with a focus on postgraduate students.

High stress levels have an impact on students' academic performance. This was particularly evident in Dikmen's (2022) quantitative study on the relationship between undergraduate students' perceived stress levels and academic achievement. Dikmen's (2022) research results showed that students' high stress levels have a significantly negative impact on academic performance. Pascoe et al. (2020) also claimed that students' learning processes, while studying at higher education institutions, were negatively influenced when stressed. Stress is common among postgraduate students as there is an expectation for them to engage with more academic material and processes at a more advanced cognitive level (Guruprakash et al., 2018).

1.6. Location of the study

This study was conducted at a private Higher Education institution in Durban, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. The selected private Higher Education institution offers undergraduate and postgraduate qualifications and has been in existence for over thirty-two years. The institution accommodates students from other countries which shows that there is a diverse range of students who engage in studies. Over and above the academic team, the institution also includes

non-academic staff who form part of the Student Experience Department. They also provide support to students on campus.

1.7. Objectives

This study aimed to gain insights into the sources of stressors among postgraduate students at a private Higher Education institution in KwaZulu-Natal and the coping strategies students use to manage stress.

The purpose of this study was:

1. To explore the key stressors among postgraduate students at a private Higher Education institution;
2. To understand the coping strategies used by postgraduate students; and
3. To determine why the particular coping strategies are useful to postgraduate students

1.8. Research Questions

This research sought to answer the following questions:

1. What are the key stressors among postgraduate students at a private Higher Education institution?
2. How do postgraduate students cope with stress?
3. Why are those particular coping strategies useful to postgraduate students?

1.9. Context of the Study

Higher Education in South Africa plays a vital role in contributing to the country's economy as well as empowering students with the necessary skills for the workplace (CHE, 2013). The focus of the study was on the perceived sources of stress, which were identified after the students had completed their postgraduate studies. The study was comprised of postgraduate students of different genders and racial backgrounds. The students included in the study belong to various socio-economic statuses, which influenced their options when coping with stress.

1.10. Significance of the Study

Postgraduate students in South Africa constantly experience ongoing difficulties during their studies. As highlighted by Houghton et al. (2024), there is an increase in anxiety and depression among students and there is a need to conduct more research relating to stress. Rockman et al. (2022) explored the challenges that postgraduate students in South Africa face. Some of the challenges include psychological burnout as some of the students are concurrently studying and working. They are also exposed to financial challenges which cause the students to feel stressed. There is an increased need for students to perform well at work and excel in their academic studies. These aforementioned factors lead to heightened stress levels in students. This study is significant because higher education institutions will be able to identify the shortcomings of their current support measures and enhance the support offered to students. Therefore, this study is not only beneficial to postgraduate students but to the management staff of the institution as well, who will be able to refine the offered services.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) has described stress as the “Health Epidemic of the 21st Century” (WHO, 2013). Due to the widespread prevalence of stress, there is a significant need to pursue and engage in studies related to stress. Stress is experienced by all individuals in some form, at some time in their lives, as it forms part of human nature. Stress is how the body responds to a perceived danger as it is a key survival instinct within human nature (Shah et al., 2009). Elevated stress levels can adversely affect the health and psychological wellbeing of individuals. Therefore, exploring perceived sources and coping with stress is fundamental in Higher Education. Furthermore, coping strategies have to be used to circumvent the level of stress that students experience. Mason (2017) indicates that while research has been conducted on student stress, the research has typically been quantitative in nature.

To date, the majority of research conducted on student stress and coping were quantitative but, this study used a qualitative framework, as it allowed students to provide an account of their personal experiences (van Vuuren et al., 2018; Langtree et al., 2018; Govender et al., 2015). Furthermore, while there are a significant number of studies that include Higher Education postgraduate studies globally, few have been conducted with South African students at this level (Brooke et al., 2020; Guruprakash et al., 2018; Rockman et al., 2022; Tariq et al., 2023).

This study is significant as it increases the available knowledge on stress and coping strategies among postgraduate students within South Africa. It will also contribute to future postgraduate students' awareness of the types of stressors they are likely to encounter and which coping strategies they could use to manage their stress. The study encourages higher education institutions to develop strategies that promote positive coping strategies so as to decrease the risk of stress among postgraduate students. The current policies that are in place can be amended based on the recommendations that the students provided in the study. The findings of the research will assist in strengthening the support structures that the institution can offer to the students which will be beneficial to both stakeholders. It will also assist the institution in orientating the postgraduate students into their studies.

1.11. Key Concepts

The following key concepts, with an explanation of each, were explored during the research study:

1.11.1. Stress

Hans Selye, the originator of the term stress, explained that stress was a neutral response from the body and could be subdivided into either positive stress, referred to as *eustress*, or negative stress, referred to as *distress* (Selye, 1976). Stress refers to the situational strain caused by challenging contexts that place a high demand on an individual's abilities and resources (Maltseva, 2024).

1.11.2. Stressor

A stressor is any internal or external factor which causes the body to release a stress hormone making the individual feel overwhelmed about the situation or circumstance (Aboh et al., 2022). A stressor is generally explained as a set of external circumstances that a person perceives as threatening to their wellbeing and strains their resources to cope with the difficult situation (Maltseva, 2024). In this study, the factors that caused students to feel stress were identified as stressors.

1.11.3. Coping Strategy

A coping strategy consists of the process of using either cognitive or behavioural methods to manage problematic circumstances which in turn plays a role in establishing the holistic wellbeing of a person (Stephenson & DeLongis, 2020). Coping strategies include actions that cause any degree of relief during stressful situations. There are two categories of coping strategies, namely: problem-focused coping strategies, which focus on the situation and changing it and emotion-focused coping strategies, which use emotions to deal with difficult situations (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The study unpacks the different types of coping strategies that postgraduate students use to manage their stress.

1.11.4. Postgraduate Students

The use of the term *postgraduate students* refers to students who have already completed and obtained an undergraduate degree and are now enrolled for a further advanced qualification such as an honours, master's, or PhD qualification (Abiwe, 2024). The focus of this study is specifically on postgraduate students studying towards their honours qualifications.

1.11.5. Higher Education Institution

In the World Declaration on Higher Education, Higher Education is described as forms of studies or research training at the postsecondary level, provided by colleges, universities, or any other educational institution that are certified as higher education institutions, as they comply with the regulations of the department of higher education (UNESCO, 2005). Higher education institutions provide educational programmes for students from various populations and include activities that are approved by a country and meet the requirements of the educational system (Klašnja-Milićević & Ivanović, 2021). The primary focus of this study is based on a private Higher Education institution.

1.12. Conclusion and Overview of the Dissertation

This chapter provided an overview of the study including the background and context of the study, the purpose of the study, the problem statement, and the significance of the study. The theoretical framework of the study was also discussed. This chapter also addressed the importance of the study and its significance to the larger body of Higher Education research

The second chapter provides a literature review about stress and coping among postgraduate students. The main aim of the literature review is to contextually position research on stress this topic and show its practical relevance as well as present an explanation of the lens through which the theoretical framework can be viewed. The third chapter focuses on the research methodology which includes a discussion on the research procedures and processes used to analyse the data. The fourth chapter, the data presentation and analysis chapter, contains the results of the study which are then further explained in relation to the objectives of the study. The fifth chapter provides a discussion of the findings, limitations of the study, and recommendations for further research.

2. CHAPTER 2 - LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Introduction

The following literature review covers pertinent literature on perceived sources of stress and coping among postgraduate students globally and in South Africa. This chapter presents various definitions of stress and the causes of stress in learning to provide more understanding about the topic of stress. This chapter will also review the different types of coping strategies, such as problem-focused and emotion-focused coping strategies. The theoretical framework, the Transactional Model of Stress and coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) that guides this study will be discussed in this chapter.

2.2. Views on stress

Stress is viewed as a psychological process which refers to an individual's perceptions and responses to any event that they deem to be dangerous (Yikealo & Tareke, 2018). According to Kumar and Bhukar (2012), stress is how the body responds to external or internal changes that require an emotional or physical response. In modern society, stress has become more prevalent and forms part of life (Kumar & Bhukar, 2012). It occurs when the current pressure that an individual is feeling exceeds the individual's perceived ability to cope with the stress.

Stress is inevitable, and people need some form of stress in their lives in order to be motivated to perform. However, the desire to perform declines when stress levels are elevated (Ismail & Jamil, 2016; Vaez, 2008). Labrague (2024) also supports this claim that although stress, overall is viewed as being harmful, if it is manageable then it can provide benefits by motivating students to excel, develop helpful coping strategies, and build resilience. People perceive stress and react to it differently based on factors such as their sociodemographic, economic, and environmental circumstances. The perception that an individual has regarding their situation will determine their level of stress.

There are two forms of stress namely, positive and negative stress. The positive aspects of stress are referred to as eustress, which involves challenges that motivate individuals to work towards their goals. Conversely, distress is a negative form of stress that produces negative outcomes (Landy & Conte, 2007). Ridner (2004) explains that students experience distress as a response to stress when they perceive that they are unable to cope effectively with the

situation. It is important for students to have a balance of eustress and distress as too much of either type of stress can become harmful.

Higher education students encounter more stress than the general population (Ibrahim et al., 2013). Pyhältö et al. (2023) claim that postgraduate students are exposed to heightened stress, extreme exhaustion, and increased levels of mental health issues. Various studies and literature indicate that students at higher education institutions experience some degree of stress, which ranges from moderate to acute depending on the circumstance (Yzer & Gilasevitch, 2018; Oyewobi et al., 2020).

A study conducted by Gulzhaina et al. (2018) indicates that students view stress as an emotional strain that is combined with negative emotions, which has an impact on their academic and personal lives. Stress affects multiple aspects of an individual's life. Owing to this, there is a need to further extrapolate the stressors which place additional strain on students in order to understand the factors that contribute to students being stressed. The factors that affect students' academic and personal lives are unpacked in this study.

2.2.1. The impact of the stress caused by COVID-19

COVID-19 and the recent difficult economic climate have caused further stress to students in South Africa. The economic disposition of the country was under strain due to the pandemic. Similarly, the higher education sector plays an integral part in the country, and it was also under strain (Mohammedqasim et al., 2023; Calvo et al., 2020). The country and students have still experienced financial issues after the pandemic. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in South Africa was also one of the contributing factors to the stress experienced by students in higher education institutions (Jarvis et al., 2021).

Students experience more stress when they face sudden changes such as the drastic effects of COVID-19 that greatly impact on personal lives and the academic environment (Selvam et al., 2023). Students at higher education institutions are faced with constant changes which lead to stress. Selvam et al. (2023) argue that post-COVID-19, the major factors of heightened stress levels in students' lives are changes in their academic environment and personal lives. The mental health of students has also been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic due to the pressures that students experienced as a result of sudden changes (Liu et al., 2020).

2.2.2. Lifestyle crisis

Yikealo and Tareke (2018) are of the view that stress in students' lives is unavoidable because it is a result of the perception of threat. Once a person perceives that a situation is harmful or is a threat, they are more inclined to feel stressed, especially if they believe that they do not have the necessary resources to cope with the situation (Labrague, 2024). This research will be beneficial as stress occurs in students' lives and as such, there is a need to ascertain more information about the prevalence of stress. Students in South Africa transitioning from secondary to tertiary level studies show more stress due to the increased demands that are placed on them (Langtree et al., 2018).

Banerjee and Chatterjee (2016) argue that stress can now be viewed as a lifestyle crisis that affects all individuals despite their stage of development. Students from higher education institutions are often exposed to overwhelming lifestyle changes, which include, in some cases, leaving their primary residences, changes in the support they receive from their peers, more exposure to decision making and an increase in their stress levels that hinder their wellbeing (Karyotaki et al., 2021; McLafferty et al., 2017). A combination of these lifestyle changes negatively impacts students.

In contemporary society and the modern world, the higher education environment has become very competitive, and the stress experienced by students is of growing concern. Stress that is experienced by students is dependent on their family status, current environment, and present lifestyle (Hossain et al., 2023). Adjustments to lifestyles occur throughout life and these adjustments can sometimes become stressful, especially for students who are already trying to cope with other changes to their circumstances (Salazar-Granizo et al., 2024).

2.2.3. Chronic stress

According to Felman (2020), students need to take the correct steps to manage their stress, which will prevent it from becoming a chronic condition. Schraml et al. (2012) explain that chronic stress is stress that recurs over time and is closely linked to severe stress-related symptoms among various age groups. Students attending higher education institutions are also exposed to stress, and if this is unmanaged over time, then it leads to chronic stress.

There are various stressors humans are exposed to on an ongoing basis. Yapijakis (2022) suggests that human needs are compromised by everyday stressful situations. Unmanaged

stress can harm an individual's emotions, thinking, and behaviour. When stress continues to be unmanaged and is chronic, it can lead to severe health problems (Chrousos, 2009). Chronic stress can have negative health implications for students if unmanaged.

It is not unusual for students to encounter stress as they journey through their studies. If stressors are experienced on an ongoing basis it may result in chronic stress which may negatively affect students' mental, physical, and emotional wellbeing (Abd-Alrazaq et al., 2024). Therefore, it is important to detect stress early and monitor stress among students to prevent them from experiencing chronic stress.

Students, who experience chronic stress over time, may experience burnout, characterised by heightened levels of physical and emotional exhaustion, along with a decrease in their ability to perform well academically (Rawis et al., 2024). Thus, chronic stress affects various aspects of a student's life ranging from personal to academic stress. Students need to identify when stress is prolonged and has become chronic in order for them to put measures in place to cope with chronic stress.

2.2.4. Wellbeing of Students

Alsultan et al. (2023) have adapted the definition of wellbeing to encompass a psychological state which is positive in nature owing to self-satisfaction, a general feeling of happiness, good stress management, and exceptional relationships (Defeyter et al., 2021; Green et al., 2021). Additionally, the wellbeing of a person aligns with an individual's expectations and self-perception based on their own goals and values (Trout & Alsandor, 2020). Hence the wellbeing of an individual is based on an overall state of equilibrium in all areas of their life.

Yangdon et al. (2021, p. 419) assert that wellbeing refers to the overarching quality of an individual's experience and their ability to function in terms of three interactive dimensions: "psychological (one's subjective experience), physical (bodily health), and social (relational experience)". The wellbeing of students is dependent on their interaction among these three dimensions.

Wongtongkam (2019) describes emotional distress as a composition of stress and anxiety. This stress is experienced by students in higher education institutions and is regarded as a serious mental health problem due to the effects that it has on the wellbeing of the student and the

resulting lack of academic achievement. Students get anxious when the assessment period approaches and this can hinder their ability to perform well in the assessments as a result of the emotional distress they experience.

Students' wellbeing is impacted by studying at higher education institutions and this may result in them not being able to focus on their studies (Gomes et al., 2016). This can lead to negligence in all aspects of their lives. Prolonged and extreme stress has the possibility of creating a long-term impact on students' emotional wellbeing and their academic performance related to their studies (Mohammedqasem et al., 2023)

Students may encounter various stressors that can significantly influence their wellbeing and academic performance, including academic challenges, demanding academic requirements, and the uncertainty of the future (Wu et al., 2020a). Yangdon et al. (2021) claim that since higher education students are exposed to different stressors, they should try to find a balance between their emotional, social, and physical state so they can perform well academically. As such, higher education institutions should prioritise students' wellbeing to help them succeed.

Alsultan et al. (2023) claim that higher education institutions are the primary resource for competencies that promote the development of students in all aspects of their lives. Hence, the professional preparation of both undergraduate and postgraduate students must be inclusive of academic, social, and psychological aspects to promote their overall wellbeing. When students have a positive sense of wellbeing, they are less likely to feel stressed.

Students who present high levels of wellbeing are able to perform more effectively and meet their academic excellence and personal growth goals (Bodeker et al., 2020; Magyar & Keyes, 2019). Wellbeing is sustainable provided there is a harmonious balance in the various aspects of the students' lives, which will then allow them to grow and develop thereby decreasing their stress.

According to Beiter et al. (2015), the academic performance and wellbeing of students are impacted by the academic pressure that arises from an overload of assessments. This is also coupled with the pressure to achieve acceptable academic results and poor time management has the likelihood of creating emotional issues which affect students' wellbeing. An increase in academic pressure is synonymous with higher stress levels.

2.3. The causes of stress in learning

Students' success rates at higher education institutions have been poor over the years (CHE, 2013). Studies conducted in South Africa indicate that the stress levels of students are high and are a challenge as they try to balance the personal and academic aspects of their lives (van Vuuren et al., 2018). According to Mason (2017), students are exposed to different types of daily stressors. General sources of stressors comprise academic pressure, economic and social factors, conflict with peers, and health, among others (Hamaideh, 2011). Based on the aforementioned studies, it is evident that both undergraduate and postgraduate students in South Africa are exposed to various sources of stress.

Alkhalwaldeh et al. (2023) conducted a study to explore the stress levels of students at a higher education institution. Some of the sources of stress identified in that study included academic, interpersonal relationships, and physical stress which shows that students are affected by various types of stressors. The study identified multiple sources of stress, including academic pressures, interpersonal relationships, and physical difficulties, highlighting that students are impacted by a range of stressors. Most of the students used social support methods to cope with stress, whilst some students used problem-solving methods and avoidance to cope with stress.

A qualitative study conducted on a combination of undergraduate and postgraduate students at a public Higher Education institution in South Africa has shown that some of the stressors students experience include a high workload, insufficient time to complete assessments, multiple formative assessments due in the same time frame, financial constraints, and difficulty in accessing resources (Seabi et al., 2014). The stressors identified in Seabi's et al. (2014) South African study have similarities to studies done globally (Alkhalwaldeh et al., 2023; Hamaideh, 2011; Veena & Shastri 2016). The global studies also indicated common stressors such as academic pressure and financial constraints.

The sources of stress experienced by students can vary, and it is important to identify these sources to help with interventions that can assist students in the future. Some of the stressors identified in the study done by Reddy et al. (2018) include academic stress, exam anxiety, work stress, poor time management, problems in financial management, and difficulties they experience in managing their personal and academic lives. This study also depicts similar types of stressors that were identified in other studies.

There are various factors which culminate and cause stress to students. McLafferty et al. (2017) support the view that students experience emotional challenges that could be caused by academic overload, competition among their peers, and pressure to be successful. Furthermore, Deasy et al. (2014) point out that the most common stressors in students are aspects of their studies, living, and social pressures.

Some of the contributing academic factors of stress that were reported by students include multiple tasks that are required to be completed, lack of free time, and long study sessions (Tariq et al., 2023). Other factors that have increased the stressors that students face include anxiety associated with assessments, academic study, and coursework (Ansari & Oskrochi, 2014; Robotham & Julian, 2006). All the aforementioned stressors are commonly found in the studies that were conducted on both undergraduate and postgraduate students.

2.3.1. Academic stress

Academic stress refers to the emotional reaction to academic environmental pressure which affects students' capability to perform well (Vaez & Laflamme, 2008). Abbasi et al. 2020 note that the most common stressors in the academic environment are related to presentations, assessment deadlines, and time management. These academic stressors produce prominent hormonal changes which lead to an increase of stress hormones. This results in students feeling stressed due to the academic pressure they experience during their studies.

According to Gupta (2020), academic stress is an ineffective and unhealthy response to the challenges of learning. Academic stress is also defined by Lal (2014) as the mental disturbance that arises from frustrations about academic failure. Academic stress is coupled with stressors in the context of academic learning, and this leads to the fear of failure among students (Fayda-Kinik, 2023). Academic stress can also relate to students not understanding the content of assessments or how to approach projects and tasks.

Academic stress forms an important element of both undergraduate and postgraduate students' academic lives because it has positive and negative implications. It can entice students to work harder and achieve good academic results, or it can add substantial pressure on them, which leads to anxiety and negatively impacts their mental health (Chua et al., 2018). Studies conducted have revealed that it is important to keep academic stress under control in order for students at higher education institutions to have a rewarding experience (Freire et al., 2018).

Oyewobi et al. (2020) claim that the pressure on students in higher education institutions to excel academically is one of the major causes of stress and can, in some instances, lead to a difficult stressful university experience. There is a plethora of research studies that have explored students' experiences of stress and the effects of stress on academic performance (Chan et al., 2018; Dada et al., 2019).

A study conducted by Punia et al. (2021) attributes two variables as the reason students experience academic stress. The two variables from the study are insufficient effort and intra-personal conflict which impact academic stress. These two variables are intrinsically linked to the individual and differ according to their personality types. These factors are cognitive and impact the level of stress experienced by students which, in turn, leads to their level of satisfaction. A student's life experiences are shaped by their individual characteristics, which affect how they perceive various situations (Craig et al., 2020).

The first variable in Punia et al.'s (2021) study is insufficient effort made by students. The term effort in this instance refers to the intention of students to perform better academically. Poor performance is a result of a lack of intention. Insufficient effort to perform well has a direct impact on the stress levels of a student's life. The second variable is intrapersonal conflicts among students (Punia et al., 2021). Intrapersonal conflict is the difference between what students intend to do and what they should do. Intrapersonal conflict arises from the clash between divergent positive and negative thoughts about circumstances. Gerasimova and Gerasymova (2019) explain that the contradictory feelings that students experience could be a result of their desire to complete tasks such as academic work.

A study conducted among postgraduate students also noted academic stress as a major contributing factor (Ezelote et al., 2021). Academic stress is the unpleasant psychological situation which arises as a result of the educational expectations from academic staff and parents, homework, and exam anxiety (Sarita, 2015). Therefore, an increase in academic stress causes students to feel more stressed.

Stress can negatively impact students studying at higher education institutions. Akanpaadgi et al. (2023) found that stress harms students' academic performance. Students experience stress, and this negatively influences their ability to learn. One of the recommendations of the study was that the counselling departments of higher education institutions should be upskilled so that they can be more effective.

Stress forms part of life and there are many causes of stress. Some of the other forms of stressors include physical health, the quality of relationships, the amount of responsibilities of an individual, expectations of others on students, and the support that students receive or lack thereof (Esia-Donkoh et al., 2011). Veena and Shastri (2016) conducted a study with undergraduate students to identify the sources of stressors they experienced. Some of the stressors that the students experienced were academic pressure to be successful, the uncertainties of the future, and the challenges of integrating into the higher education system.

Further sources of stress include ongoing assessments that students must complete, the additional work required outside of lectures, unclear instructions for their assessments, conflicts with their lecturers or peers (especially in cases of group work), poor sleeping routines, and loneliness (Hamaideh, 2011). According to Kausar (2010), students studying at higher education institutions perceive their academic life to be stressful and report stressors during the term that include academic demands and social adjustment. Academic stress is a combination of emotional stress and anxiety which students experience (Kausar, 2010).

Stress that is experienced by both undergraduate and postgraduate students is multifactorial and may occur due to either academic or non-academic factors. When compared to non-academic factors such as social and emotional factors, academic factors were the main cause of stress among students (Vaez & Laflamme, 2008). Students have associated stress with poor academic performance as some of the qualifications are demanding and as a result, students experience stress (Aboalshamat et al., 2017).

Dopmeijer (2021) claims that in cases where higher education students experience psychological distress, there is a decrease in their academic productivity. There is a rise in academic failure when psychological problems experienced by students are inflated. McLafferty et al. (2017) state that students who encounter psychological issues have difficulty in maintaining good academic progress. Based on the aforementioned studies, there is a correlation between students encountering stress when they are psychologically distressed.

Academic stress is emerging as a prominent issue that affects students globally, with different factors contributing to its widespread prevalence (Tom & George, 2022). Similarly, Roman and Maftai (2023) explain that academic stress has become extremely prevalent among both undergraduate and postgraduate students, and has a considerable effect on students' physical and mental health. Vaez and Laflamme (2008) found that academic stress has a noticeable negative association with the health complaints of the student population. Since academic stress

is occurring and affecting students, it is important to conduct more research about academic stress and unpack the factors that lead to students performing poorly.

Misra and Misra (2023) claim that excessive stress which is undetected by students could lead to distinct health and mental health issues, and this negatively impacts their academic performance. Stress can have both positive and negative consequences in students' lives (Yzer & Gilasevitch, 2018). If it is unfavourable stress then it is capable of inhibiting and reducing the ability to master the curriculum and consequently leading to poor academic performance among students. Joseph and Sudhesh (2023) claim that when students adjust to the academic environment, and when there are acceptable social support systems in place, there can be a decrease in academic stress. It is therefore important to create a supportive academic environment for students and provide sufficient resources to inhibit the effects of academic stress.

2.3.2. Financial stress

University students come from different backgrounds. Some come from privileged backgrounds with affluent families whilst others come from impoverished and underprivileged socioeconomic backgrounds. Hence, the theme of financial stress is a current and common challenge for both undergraduate and postgraduate students (Mahali et al., 2018). This type of stress is evident wherein students do not have financial assistance or bursaries to pay for their studies. Additionally, students have other living expenses they are responsible for and this also causes them to experience financial stress during their studies. Financial stress is a stressor for university students in South Africa, particularly due to economic instability over the years.

A country's economic growth is stimulated by the role that higher education plays in empowering individuals with skills that can be used when sourcing work (CHE, 2013). Family and financial obligations were also found to be contributing factors to the stress experienced by postgraduate students (Sarita, 2015). According to Denovan and Macaskill (2016), students are facing an increase in financial pressure. As a result, students are forced to combine studying with working which has negatively impacted their studies due to the stress they encounter.

Hossain et al. (2023) argue that the increasing burden of student loans and tuition fees for higher education students is of growing concern. Financial self-efficacy for students appears to be rare and impacts students' wellness. Gender, living status, and borrowing loan factors all

have a strong association with financial stress. Results from the study conducted by Hossain et al. (2023) indicate that financial stress significantly impacts students' involvement in their academic and personal lives.

2.3.3. Mental health issues

Recently, mental health has come to the forefront of issues that all humans have to deal with. Tripathi et al. (2022) describe mental health as an integral component of health and wellbeing. According to the World Health Organization (2013), mental health is referred to as a state of wellbeing whereby the person acknowledges their abilities, can cope with stressors, and can work productively. Son et al. (2020) claim students' mental health in the higher education sphere has become of increasing concern.

Globally, there is an increase in mental health issues among higher education students (Macaskill, 2012; Deasy et al., 2014; Gore et al., 2011). This suggests that students are not sufficiently prepared to cope with stressors due to social factors and protective backgrounds (Royal College of Psychiatrists, 2011). Students often feel very overwhelmed due to the mental health issues they face, and this places additional pressure on them in the academic environment.

In recent years, there has been a crisis of mental health and elevated stress among students (Price, 2023). Mental health issues are on the rise in higher education among postgraduate students specifically and can even lead to students dropping out of the qualification as they cannot cope with the pressure (Delderfield et al., 2020). Currently, there is consensus that the consistent, stressful circumstances of higher education students combined with unhealthy coping strategies, could show an increase in students suffering from mental health issues (Li & Yang, 2016; Scribner et al., 2020). Due to the stress that students experience, there is importance in conducting research related to mental health issues as highlighted by various scholars.

2.4. Coping with stress

Coping is defined as an individual's constantly changing cognitive and behavioural efforts to manage internal and external demands which are deemed to exceed the individual's resources (Shah et al. 2009). Coping strategies are categorised by either the focus on the problem or emotion (Hatunoglu, 2020). Coping strategies which focus on the problem comprise rational responses and planned actions that the students can take to cope with stress. Conversely, emotion-focused coping involves managing the emotions that arise in response to stress (Hatunoglu, 2020).

Rabenu and Yaniv (2017) define coping strategies as the basic categories that are used to distinguish how individuals react to stress. Rilveria (2018) notes that people use various coping strategies that differ from person to person based on their preferences. McAlpine and Norton (2006) indicate that a good balance between postgraduate students' academic and personal lives reduces their stress levels. This balance can be achieved by using positive coping strategies that lower stress levels among students.

Coping includes all the activities that individuals engage in, to tolerate or reduce the perception of the threat. Coping is important to reduce, minimise, and tolerate stress especially when students use positive coping strategies (Gustems-Carnicer & Calderón, 2013). Coping strategies are important as they help to lessen or overcome the stress that students experience (Ismail & Jamil, 2016). Coping strategies allow people to adjust and change their behavioural and cognitive efforts to manage the stress that would generally exceed their resources (Oyewobi et al., 2020). Students can make use of several different coping strategies, which are dependent on their circumstances and context (Schoenmakers et al., 2015).

Naidoo and Cartwright (2020) ascertain that South African university students experience a range of stressors daily, both historical and contemporary. These stressors place a strain on students and inhibit their coping resources as well as their resilience to persevere on both a personal and academic level. Resilience is defined as the ability to recover from challenges and adversity whilst coping with stress (Southwick & Charney, 2018).

The research study conducted by Reddy et al. (2018) depicts that students have diversified levels of stress, and establishing good wellbeing is imperative to coping with stress in all aspects of life, both personally and academically. Some of the ways in which students can cope

with stress include meditation, yoga, and psychotherapies which are positive coping strategies and have been more inclined to yield positive results.

Mason (2017) found that students use problem-focused and emotion-focused strategies to cope with stress, but also use avoidance strategies. Students reported that they used maladaptive strategies, such as alcohol and non-prescribed medications, which can have adverse effects on their wellbeing. In my research study, I will endeavour to explore if students made use of maladaptive strategies and if that had an impact on their wellbeing. According to Cevik (2020), students encounter various challenges during their time at university, and they have to make use of coping strategies, such as leisure activities, to deal with the stress they face. Leisure activities involve participating in enjoyable activities, which can act as a buffer against stress.

Wongtongkam (2019) and Wodka and Barakat (2007) claim that the problem-focused approach to coping with stress is more likely to yield positive health outcomes. Problem-focused is more adaptive than emotion-focused coping. Similarly, the social support students receive from their peers, friends, and family has a positive effect on their adaptive skills to manage and cope with stressful circumstances (Yusoff et al., 2013).

2.4.1. Problem-focused coping strategies

In the South African context, a qualitative study was conducted with international postgraduate students to explore the coping strategies they used to manage their stress (Chiweshe et al., 2022). It was found that students engaged in problem-focused coping, such as managing their time and supplementing their income to assist with financial concerns. They also managed their stress by enlisting support from academic staff and their family, which is a form of emotion-focused coping. An example of problem-focused coping is when a higher education student plans ahead for assessments, allowing them to avoid stress due to the reduction in time pressure (Jensen et al., 2016).

2.4.2. Emotion-focused coping strategies

Jensen et al. (2016) state that emotion-focused coping occurs when students enlist emotional and social support from other people when they struggle with their circumstances. Students can lean on their family and friends for support during times in their lives when they feel stressed.

Emotion-focused coping deals with how individuals manage their emotions when encountering challenges (Rodríguez-Pérez et al., 2017). The focus is on using emotions and support to help deal with stress.

2.4.3. Positive coping strategies

A study conducted by Tariq et al. (2023) focused on postgraduate students internationally and the stress they experienced. Students experienced high levels of stress and used active coping and acceptance as the most common strategies to cope with stress. The most common coping strategies used were spending time with friends and using social media. Brooke et al. (2020) found that postgraduate students engaged in both positive and maladaptive coping strategies. Some of the positive coping strategies included listening to music, social connections, and engaging in sporting activities.

Ezelote et al. (2021) noted that the positive coping strategies used by postgraduate students in Nigeria were social support, humour, and positive re-interpretation. However, students also used negative coping strategies, which included denial, mental disengagement, and enlisting the help of other students to assist with project completion. Working-class postgraduate students in South Africa used their time management skills, work-study balance, and support from families to cope with stress (Rockman et al., 2022). To be successful in their studies, students must use positive coping strategies to achieve their goals.

Some psychological coping mechanisms, such as optimism and self-control, have been helpful to students (Denovan & Macaskill, 2016). According to Aspinwall and Taylor (1992), the greater the optimism, the lower the stress and the higher an individual's wellbeing. In addition, the use of social support has resulted in students adjusting better to higher education. Yates (2002) argues that optimism in students was a predictor of higher academic achievement. Students who have higher levels of optimism have been found to use more effective coping strategies as they expect a favourable outcome which lowers their stress levels (Lopes & Cunha, 2008).

Tangney et al. (2004) established that students who had a higher level of self-control had better academic performance and showed better psychological adjustment to their studies. Self-control is when an individual can exercise caution in their behaviour, which will positively impact long-term goals. Self-control is linked to the ability to solve problems and is a

component of problem-focused coping (Fraser & Tucker, 1997). Greene et al. (2017) claim that some of the coping strategies students use include making lifestyle changes, exercising, focusing on themselves, and speaking about their feelings to someone they trust.

Shimazu et al. (2020) have provided strategies that can assist with protecting mental health, such as a good sleeping routine and healthy nutrition. In addition to this, the psychological strategies that can be used include relaxation and positive coping. Holmes et al. (2020) argue along similar lines for a longer-term strategy that can be implemented to promote psychosocial wellbeing and this includes positive coping strategies such as problem-focused coping. Positive coping strategies help to uphold control over situations, which in turn creates positive daily experiences that provide temporary respite from prolonged stress (Shimazu et al., 2020).

2.4.4. Negative Coping Strategies

Negative coping strategies are referred to as maladaptive strategies and they comprise prolonged gaming, excessive eating, and the consumption of drugs and alcohol. Negative coping strategies tend to have an unfavourable impact on students' lives. Some students choose to engage in negative coping strategies such as denial, self-blame and self-distraction to cope with stress (Ismail & Jamil, 2016). Datar et al. (2017) conducted a study which found that students using negative coping strategies tend to experience higher stress levels. A study done by Ezelote (2021) found that postgraduate students used negative coping strategies such as denial, mental disengagement and escape from the problem to cope with stress. These are all maladaptive coping strategies which can have a negative impact on different aspects of the students' lives.

2.4.5. Support in assisting and alleviating stress among students

Social support is an extensive term that represents social activities that an individual engages in to promote their wellbeing and manage health problems (Cohen et al., 2000). An individual's coping strategies are closely connected to their social support system, which is also related to their mental and physical (Wongtongkam, 2019). Sarason et al. (1990) describe perceived social support as the individual's awareness and perception of the overall availability of support and their satisfaction with the support.

Seeking inappropriate social support, escape avoidance, substance abuse, and an unhealthy diet were some of the uncovered coping strategies that have negative connotations associated with them (Deasy et al., 2014). Poor coping strategies identified by Nerdrum et al. (2006) comprise escaping through substance abuse, ignoring the issue, and not seeking assistance from others. These poor coping strategies result in students feeling increased stressed.

Wilson et al. (2022) state that due to students' rising stress levels, the support measures offered by higher education institutions should be of key priority. Versteeg and Kappe (2021) claim that both resilience and the support that higher education institutions provide can assist in alleviating the effects of academic stress experienced by undergraduate and postgraduate students. It is therefore important for higher education institutions to be aware that there is a need to implement support services that can be of assistance to students who are stressed.

Mohangi and Olivier (2023) claim that support, in the form of counselling, is instrumental in assisting students to overcome the barriers they experience and deal with their stress. When students attempt to address their mental health issues by utilising counselling services, they often encounter challenges, including restricted access to these services or insufficient awareness of their existence. Mohangi and Olivier (2023) argue that there is a need for counselling services to support postgraduate students.

There is growing awareness of undergraduate and postgraduate students' high stress levels, which leads to poor mental health among students (Bantjes et al., 2023). There is also a need to improve student's access to support services and widen the range of support interventions. Mohangi and Olivier (2023) assert that higher educational institutions should provide counselling as a support measure to postgraduate students who face emotional, psychological, and educational challenges. Kernan et al. (2011) lend support to the claim that a good and successful learning environment for university students must have significant student support services in the form of counselling services, wellness programmes, and academic support. There are positive consequences when there are strong connections between measures to prevent stress and student support services.

There has been an increase in the focus on student wellbeing in South African universities owing to heightened stress levels (Makhubela, 2021; van Zyl et al., 2017). Universities need to provide aid to students who are dealing with stress. Support resources are required in higher education institutions to assist students in coping with stress (Awoke et al., 2021; Rusch et al.,

2021). Baik et al. (2019) claim that there is a potential role for higher education institutions to provide resources that can assist students in dealing with stress.

Raffaelli et al. (2013) are of the view that when there is sufficient support from higher education institutions there is a reduction in stress, especially if students enlist help from the institution and use the available support services. But there is still some stigma attached to seeking support which often results in students not reaching out for help. A lack of awareness of support services is a gap in higher education institutions and should be addressed (Rusch et al., 2021).

2.5. Theoretical framework

A theoretical framework provides the lens through which the researcher observes, interprets, and analyses their data (Kivunja, 2018). The chosen theoretical framework will support the research and determine which aspects of the gathered data are included or removed from the data analysis (Omodan, 2022). Various theoretical models seek to explain psychological stress which is a complex phenomenon. For my research study, the theoretical framework used is the Transactional Model of Stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) as this model is most applicable to understanding how students respond and react to various stressful situations.

2.5.1. Transactional Model of Stress

The Transactional Model of Stress, which was selected for this study, was developed by Lazarus and Folkman (1984). The focus of this model is on how individuals interpret events that are threatening in nature (Martin & Daniels, 2014). The effects of stress on a person can be determined by how the person perceives the stress and how they interact with their surrounding environment

This model applies to this study as assists in drawing conclusions for students who are stressed. The Transactional Model of Stress identifies stressors as demands from the environment that can cause an imbalance in the person (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). This, in turn, influences the psychological wellbeing of the individual. Action is then required to be taken to restore the balance, and this can be done by using coping strategies.

Experiences of stress in the Transactional Model of Stress are a result of the interaction between the causes of stress (stressor) and the student's perception of their control over the stressor

(Goh et al., 2010). The different types of stressors are explored during this research study. The Transactional Model of Stress was chosen as its underpinning characteristic is to consider the relationship between the individual and the environment they find themselves in by looking at the interaction of internal and external factors (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Students show different reactions to the stressors they face based on their experience of the stressor. It is, therefore, important to identify the types of stressors and the coping strategies students use. Similarly, the Transactional Model of Stress was used in this study to view how students perceive stress and which coping strategies they have used whilst studying.

The premise of this model notes that an event that is deemed to be potentially stressful may cause a trigger in the primary cognitive appraisal process in terms of how the person views the level of threat to their wellbeing (Goh et al. 2010). The primary appraisal process occurs when a person assesses whether a situation is threatening or safe, relevant or irrelevant to their situation (Kail, et al. 2019). During the primary appraisal process, the individual's reaction to the stressful situation is based on how much of a threat they perceive the situation to be.

Cooper and Quick (2017) emphasise that the Transactional Model of Stress focuses on the intensity of stress and an individual's reaction to that stress. This is ultimately influenced by both primary and secondary cognitive appraisal processes. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) essentially focused on two main areas in the Transactional Model of Stress. The first area involves the need to have a better understanding of how important positive emotions are when coping with stress. The second area deals with the role that coping processes play in facilitating positive emotions when exceptionally stressful events occur.

The Transactional Model of Stress specifies that stress has an influence on the performance outcomes of individuals through processes of appraisal and coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Similarly, Zhao et al. (2020) claim that the processes of primary and secondary appraisal together with the selected coping process influence how individuals manage and cope with stress to achieve a particular outcome. It is dependent on how the person views the level of stress in any situation or circumstance.

Scribner et al. (2020) advance their claim that higher education students have different external and internal variables which cause significant stress. Students are required to adjust to the stress based on their perception of the intensity of the stress. McGrath (1976) postulates that a person evaluates the stress they experience through a cognitive appraisal process and thereafter identifies if the stressor is beneficial or harmful to the individual. Cognitive appraisal refers to

a process of evaluation of the individual's current environment in order to determine how it may affect their wellbeing (Biggs et al., 2017). In circumstances where events are perceived as being threatening, the secondary appraisal process will then indicate the person's ability to manage the threat. Once the cognitive appraisals have been actioned, the coping strategies are then initiated (Goh et al., 2010).

Sharma and Gupta (2023) assert that positive appraisals suggest that encounters with the environment and technology are beneficial and could enhance the wellbeing of the individual. According to Lazarus (1966), three elements need to be checked: 1. Is the threat highly significant to the individual? 2. Is it a positive experience? 3. Is it harmful? (Kail et al., 2019). Once an individual considers the situation to be threatening, they will then respond with fear, anxiety, and stress. This study focuses on how students perceive their higher education experience and if they feel threatened by the situation. The Transactional Model of Stress and the primary appraisal process deal with how students deal with their challenges.

Lazarus and Folkman (1984) claim that there are two types of coping, namely problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping. Problem-focused coping epitomises seeking a solution to the problem, whereas emotion-focused coping refers to the dependency on a social support system to deal with the problem (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Both categories of coping strategies can be useful to students who deal with stressful situations (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). This research study identifies which types of coping strategies students use when they are stressed. Mann (2018) is of the view that the Transactional Model of Stress and coping plays a vital role in describing how students use appraisals and coping strategies to deal with stress when at university.

Lazarus Folkman's Transactional Model of Stress was used in a qualitative study with final-year undergraduate students in South Africa to analyse the stress that students experienced (Jarvis et al., 2021). Perceptions of students' situations were mainly related to uncertainty, and this caused students to experience stress. Through the process of reappraisal, students were able to cope with the difficulties they experienced. This shows that this model is applicable in South Africa as it has already been used in previous studies related to the stress of students at higher education institutions.

2.6. Conclusion

This chapter has presented the literature review used to understand the topic of stress among students from preceding studies. The various views on stress were elaborated on and there was a discussion of the different types of coping strategies, such as problem-focused, emotion-focused, negative, and positive strategies. The following chapter will provide details on the research methodology used in this study.

3. CHAPTER 3 - RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1. Introduction

The primary aim of the present study was to explore the relationship between perceived stress and coping strategies in a postgraduate student population. The previous chapter covered the literature on perceived sources of stress and coping among postgraduate students both locally and internationally. Additionally, the chapter also highlighted the theoretical framework relevant to the study, specifically, the Transactional Model of Stress and coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). In this chapter, I present the research design and methodology utilised in the study. I begin with the research aims and details of the sample and instruments used for the measurement of the constructs. I then illuminate the research procedure and data analysis process. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the ethical considerations of this study, trustworthiness, and data management.

3.2. The Research Design

3.2.1. The Research Paradigm

A research paradigm is defined by Ugwu et al. (2021) as a basic system or worldview that guides the researcher about what is suitable for research and how this should be carried out. Mohammed (2023) describes a research paradigm as an overarching framework that guides the research design and how the study is conducted and interpreted. The aim is to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon based on the context and to explore diverse perspectives. Similarly, in this study, the aim was to ascertain an enriched understanding of the postgraduate students' perception of stress and coping. The students also shared their diverse personal experiences. A research paradigm is a set of assumptions, beliefs, and practices that direct the researcher's understanding of the research study (Rahman, 2023). A research paradigm is described as a belief system and underpinning theoretical framework which focuses on how reality is understood (Rehman & Alharthi, 2016). Social researchers generate data from different points of view by making observations of experiences (Blaikie, 2000).

Paradigms encompass the notions and values that shape the way in which the researcher views, interacts, and interprets the world (Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022). Ryan (2018) believes that the truth and knowledge of a situation are subjective because there are differences in everyone's

cultural and lived experiences. In this study, the participants had varying life experiences at a private Higher Education institution which contributed to their varied responses and descriptions of their postgraduate studies. There are various research paradigms namely, conventional and alternative paradigms (Rahman, 2023). The conventional research paradigm refers to the dominant paradigm in a field of study. As a result, the alternative research paradigm differs from and challenges the dominant paradigm (Davies & Fisher, 2018; Kamal, 2019; Zukauskas et al., 2018).

Interpretivism is a form of alternative research paradigm (Tamminen & Poucher, 2020). Research that is conducted with alternative research paradigms uses qualitative methods to understand the experience of the participants. The focus is on understanding the meaning that participants derive from their experiences (Hürlimann, 2019; Shava & Nkengbeza, 2019). This study used the alternative research paradigm in the form of the qualitative method of study. As there are various research paradigms, this study selected the interpretivist paradigm. The interpretivist paradigm seeks to understand phenomena. The central premise of interpretivism is that humans are essentially different from objects and cannot be studied in the same manner (Du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2021). According to Mohammed (2023), interpretivism highlights the subjective nature of human experiences and interactions, emphasising the importance of understanding the meaning behind situations. The interpretivist paradigm asserts that knowledge is constructed through interaction between people and is not measured objectively (Omodan, 2022). The interpretivist paradigm was selected for this study so the researcher could generate data from postgraduate students and gain an understanding of the stress they experienced.

3.2.2. Qualitative Research Approach

There are three philosophies in research, namely ontology, epistemology, and methodology (Rehman & Alharthi, 2016). Ontology describes the assumptions made about reality and how phenomena exist (Rehman & Alharthi, 2016). Ontologically, interpretivists believe that external reality is not experienced in the same way by all humans (Du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2021). They believe that reality is socially constructed and depends on the meaning that humans ascribe to their personal experiences. The ontology of interpretive researchers' belief is that there is no single reality; instead, there are many realities in the universe (Creswell, 2013). Mohammed (2023) claims that interpretivism ontologically asserts reality to be subjective and

it varies among people and their social contexts. Ontology aims to provide answers to questions about the nature of reality (Rahi, 2017). Ontology deals with questioning assumptions about an individual's understanding of the world. In doing so, there is a more detailed and deeper understanding of what is real and what is not in the world (Pidgeon, 2019). According to Arora and Sharma (2023), ontology can be defined as how the researcher understands the truth and reality. It involves articulating the way in which the world is structured. The ontology of interpretivism puts forward the claim that social processes are guided by human interaction and states that social structures are not formed naturally (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020). This study focused on students' personal experiences during their studies and the stress they were exposed to.

Epistemology refers to the nature of knowledge and how it is attained and communicated to others (Rehman & Alharthi, 2016). The idea of objective knowledge is challenged in interpretivism as the focus is on the individual's subjective experience. Epistemology involves the process wherein the researcher uncovers the truth and reality. It also focuses on the nature of the relationship between the researcher and human knowledge and how it can be understood through various types of investigation (Levy et al., 2020; Ntakumba and de Jongh, 2023). Epistemology assists in providing an understanding of how we can acquire knowledge and ascertains what information gathered can be known with certainty (Khaldi, 2017). It also makes us assess our own beliefs and assumptions which results in us engaging in critical thinking. This study focuses on the subjective experiences of the postgraduate students which will assist in understanding the stress they encountered and their employed coping mechanisms.

3.2.3. Methodology

This study chose a case study research methodology. According to Rehman and Allharthi (2016), a research methodology is defined as the study and analysis of data. It is the plan of action which informs the choice of which research methods will be used. The research design used in this study is Interpretivism, which is based on how people experience reality internally (Du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2021). This research study used the qualitative approach to get more information from the students regarding their experiences. Qualitative research gains an in-depth understanding through the use of in-depth interviews. Qualitative research is exploratory and descriptive in nature, which provides greater explanations of situations (Creswell, 2013). In-depth interviews provides the researcher with greater insight into students' experiences

which helps the research develop themes and strategies to help students in the future (Maree, 2021).

Research methodology is defined as a systematic approach to generating, analysing, and interpreting data to draw conclusions about the selected subject matter (Jagdale et al., 2019; Marhasova, 2022). There are three types of research methods namely, the quantitative, qualitative and mixed methods approach (Marhasova, 2022). For this study, the qualitative research methodology was used to ascertain more information about postgraduate students' experiences of stressors and coping strategies at a private higher education institution.

Obilor (2023) defines research methodology as the search for knowledge that involves data generation, data analysis, interpretation of the analysis, and reporting of the findings. Research methodology aims to recount, analyse, and infer a range of approaches when data is gathered (Clough & Nutbrown, 2012). Research is conducted to obtain findings to increase the understanding of a chosen topic (Creswell, 2009). As such, a research design refers to a plan of how the researcher will generate and analyse the data needed to answer the research questions (Bertram & Christiansen, 2020).

Dubey and Kothari (2022) state that a research design incorporates a well-planned outline of the research including research approaches, design methods and procedures, selection of participants, data generation methods, and the methods to be used in processing and analysing data. According to Saunders et al. (2012), a research design refers to a plan for how the research questions will be answered. It involves deciding how the data will be generated, which tools will be used to generate the data and essentially, how the data will be analysed. Rehman and Alharthi (2016) confirm the aforementioned description by describing research methodology as the rules that guide the researcher in deciding the type of data that is required and which data generation tool should be used.

3.3. Research Approach

3.3.1. Research Approach Adopted

There are three types of research approaches which can be used in research studies, whether quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-method research. The qualitative research approach was used for this study as the researcher sought to delve deeper into postgraduate students'

experiences. A qualitative research approach was selected because the methodology is most suitable for uncovering information that is rich in meaning. According to Maree (2021), qualitative research focuses on understanding the processes and social constructs which shape a sample's behaviour patterns. It seeks to create a story through participants' shared experiences.

Qualitative research studies focus on understanding a certain circumstance from the viewpoint of participants who experienced it (Hennink et al., 2020; Silverman, 2020). Aspers and Corte (2019) define qualitative research as a process of getting closer to the phenomenon, by observing and talking to people. Creswell (2013) explains the qualitative approach as looking into the meaning that people attach to everyday situations and gathering information. This is done by talking directly to people and observing their behaviour in various contexts. Similarly, in this study, the researcher used this method of talking to people in order to ascertain information.

Qualitative research provides new information on topics that are researched and explores the quality of relationships and situations (Islam & Aldaihani, 2022). The strength of qualitative research lies in probing the inner human-centred issues (Muzari et al., 2022). According to Mohajan (2018), qualitative research is a subjective approach to expound on the daily life experiences of people and to allot meaning to those experiences. As a result, the focus is on the meaning, interpretations, and relationships of social experiences. The qualitative research approach allowed the researcher to study participants in the natural setting by attempting to interpret the phenomena in terms of the experiences that participants shared. The direct source of data for qualitative research comes from the participant's natural setting. It comprises the real-life experiences of the participants as well as day-to-day events which have occurred (Lune & Berg, 2017). The postgraduates were questioned about their real-life experiences which are in keeping with the structure of qualitative research.

Leavy (2017) claims that a qualitative research approach enables researchers to obtain a robust understanding of a research topic and unpack the meanings that individuals ascribe to their lives and the circumstances they experience. In this study, the qualitative approach uncovered the stressors students had experienced and the coping styles they used during their studies. This was done by conducting in-depth interviews with the students, which allowed the researcher the ability to gain a better perspective of their experiences. Maree (2021) argues that the

strength of qualitative research is that it is rich in detail and provides descriptions of the data generated.

While research studies in South Africa relating to the topic of stress have been done in the form of quantitative research design, this study utilises a qualitative approach that provides the opportunity to uncover students' personal experiences of stress and coping (Mason, 2017). It is for this reason that the qualitative research approach was selected for this study as it provides more in-depth explanations. Qualitative research design is linguistic in nature as the focus is on words and not on numerical data. It focuses on meaning-based data analysis (Maree, 2021). Qualitative research is conducted to explore the underlying qualities of the experiences of the participants and the meaning derived from the experiences (Du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2021). Qualitative research aims to explore and understand the phenomenon of the study. Qualitative research provides an opportunity for participants to be reflective when sharing their experiences. Likewise, in this study, the experiences of the postgraduate students were revealed using the qualitative research design in order to generate data that would be rich in meaning.

3.3.2. Case Study

According to Wagner et al. (2012), a research design includes how the research will be conducted and comprises selecting the research methodology, the method by which the data will be generated, and the techniques used to analyse the data. The research design method selected for this study is a single exploratory case study. According to Rule and John (2011), a case study is a systematic and in-depth study of one particular case in its context. Case studies are highly descriptive of the situation being explored. Case studies recount the real-life situations that have taken place and describe the phenomenon of the circumstances (Du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2021). There is a deep exploration of the circumstances in order to understand the phenomenon. The focus is on the subjective experience of the participants.

A case analysis is a careful analysis of a subject and an extensive review of individuals or groups of people (Choudrie et al., 2023; Werang and Leba, 2022). Porter (2023) explains that an explanatory case study places a focus on how a phenomenon can be explained. The main aim of an exploratory case is to gain insight into an unknown phenomenon or experience. Another aim of a case study is to show the necessity for further investigations regarding a topic (Almås et al., 2023; Fukuzawa et al., 2022; Hlady-Rispal et al., 2021).

In studies that contain case studies, the researcher aims to encapsulate the shared experiences of participants' lives and their views on a particular topic or situation (Bertram & Christiansen, 2020). Saunders et al. (2012) explain that a single exploratory case study is used to represent rare cases that have not been explored by many researchers. A single exploratory case study is applicable in this research as, while there has been research conducted on this topic, the focus has yet to be primarily on postgraduate students in South Africa. For this research, the participants have provided an account of their postgraduate studies and their perceptions of stress and coping. In this single exploratory case study, the students provided insight into how they coped with stress during their studies and whether they used any of the support offered by the institution.

For qualitative research, a case study is used owing to its empirical enquiry which emphasises present-day issues of the lived experiences of participants (Berg, 2009). In this study, the focus was on the current stressful challenges that the students encountered. Clough and Nutbrown (2012) explain that a case study leads to a plan of confining the research study to a small sample which will allow the researcher to conduct in-depth investigations through direct interaction with the participants. There were eight participants who were interviewed, which is a small sample of participants. This sample size allowed for in-depth questioning and analysis of the interviews as there were fewer participants to interview.

3.4. Research Setting

This study was conducted at a private Higher Education institution in Durban, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. The selected private Higher Education institution offers undergraduate and postgraduate qualifications and has been in existence for over thirty-two years. Over and above the academic team, the institution also has non-academic staff who form part of the student experience department. They also provide support to students on campus. The institution offers a wide series of postgraduate degree choices in the fields of Management Studies, Humanities, and Social Sciences, Computer Sciences, and Finance and Accounting.

The institution is represented by a diverse student population as it includes students of varied races, genders, classes, physical abilities, and religions. The institution also accommodates students who come from other countries. The Higher Education institution can accommodate

about 3000 students inclusive of undergraduate and postgraduate students. These students hail from different socioeconomic backgrounds as local and international students.

The selected Higher Education institution is described as being diverse in nature due to the acceptance of students with varied disabilities. The physical structure of the campus has the appropriate measures, resources, and support structures available to encompass students with disabilities as these students are not excluded. In the same way, the campus is diverse in terms of the racial backgrounds of the students, and the campus does not exclude or discriminate against students based on their socioeconomic circumstances. As such, the campus caters to students from diverse backgrounds as the student population is made up of students from medium-income family backgrounds as well as students from affluent families.

3.5. Study Population

The research population is the larger collection of individuals who are the focus of the study. Participants are selected based on similar characteristics. Fraenkel et al., (2015) describe the population as the larger group of people that the researcher will apply the findings to once the study has been conducted. Dawson (2019) claims that qualitative research is conducted to explore the occurrences within a smaller group of people as the data generated from the smaller groups might provide insight into the situation of the wider population. Ernest et al. (2023) define a population as an entire identifiable group which is of interest to the researcher and relevant to the research study. The Higher Education institution is characterised by a diverse group of students who are of various genders, races, physical abilities, and religions. These students could be local or international. For this study, the focus group was on postgraduate students only.

3.6. Sampling of the Research Participants

According to Islam and Aldaihani (2022), sampling is the process of selecting participants for the research study. Sampling involves choosing participants who will be a representative part of the population (Obilor, 2023). The main purpose of sampling is to increase the opportunity to access as much of the population as possible so that conclusions can be provided and will apply to the population. The population of the study is the specified elements from which the

sample is selected. The sample is the subset of the population selected to be participants in the study (Du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2021). In this study, the target population will be postgraduate students at a private Higher Education institution in Durban KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa.

Patton (2015) describes purposive sampling as selecting the best cases for the research study which will then produce the best data. The research findings are derived from the sampled cases. Purposive sampling is a crucial feature of research design as it involves selecting participants based on specific criteria. This approach ensures that participants are better equipped to answer questions related to the topic, resulting in richer data generation (Morse, 2010). Purposive sampling is when the researcher chooses the participants based on specific choices. The sample is not selected on a random basis; instead, some criteria are used when selecting the sample (Bertram & Christiansen, 2020). The purposive sampling method was the most suitable method for this research study as the sampling needed to be conducted with a precise purpose. Specific criteria were applicable to this study and formed the specifications for selecting the participants.

In this study, the criteria was that participants must be enrolled in postgraduate programs at a private higher education institution in South Africa, representing diverse genders, racial backgrounds, and socioeconomic statuses. Purposive sampling is apt for this research study as specific criteria are involved when selecting the participants. The sample size will pose as a representation of the population as it was not feasible to interview the entire student population. The population of postgraduate students is approximately one hundred and twenty-five postgraduate students, and the sample size is eight students. As this is a qualitative study, eight students were selected and interviewed.

It is generally unrealistic to include the entire population in research due to constraints of time and cost. Subsequently, a portion of the population was selected via the means of sampling. The sample size posed as a representation of the population of postgraduate students. One of the sampling objectives was to gather information about the population of postgraduate students, and this required the researcher to be succinct when selecting the sample size. This assisted in ensuring the validity of the results, which could thereafter be generalised to the population of postgraduate students (Maree, 2021). The interview and transcribing process is lengthy which is why only eight students formed part of the sample size.

3.7. The Sociodemographics of Study Participants

This study was conducted at a private Higher Education institution in Durban, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. Eight postgraduate students were interviewed, of which three were male and five were female. They were in the age range of 18-27. To explore the perceptions of stress and coping of the postgraduate students and their experiences, the participants were selected from one private Higher Education institution. The postgraduate students were registered for the Bachelor of Commerce Honours and Bachelor of Arts Honours qualifications. The researcher sought to gather a broad spectrum of information from a diverse group of students, which included Black, Indian, and White postgraduate participants.

Participants' identities were protected through pseudonyms. Since people's names are very personal to them, in qualitative research the norm is to use pseudonyms to protect the identity of the research participants and prevent exposing them to various risks (Lahman et al., 2023). A pseudonym refers to a fictitious name that is different from the real name of a person and qualitative researchers usually take measures to protect information that could potentially identify the participants (Heaton, 2022). In this study, I have assigned pseudonyms to the participants, namely, Thabo, Tezlyn, Zoey, Maxine, Chad, Hannah, Liam, and Esther. Table 3.1 illustrates the participant's pseudonym, gender, age, and qualification.

Table 3.1 - Demographic Profile of Participants

NAME	GENDER	AGE	QUALIFICATION
Thabo	Male	23-27	Bachelor of Commerce Honours
Tezlyn	Female	18-22	Bachelor of Arts in Psychology
Zoey	Female	23-27	Bachelor of Commerce Honours
Maxine	Female	18-22	Bachelor of Commerce Honours
Chad	Male	18-22	Bachelor of Commerce Honours
Hannah	Female	18-22	Bachelor of Commerce Honours
Liam	Male	23-27	Bachelor of Commerce Honours
Esther	Female	18-22	Bachelor of Commerce Honours

3.8. Method of Data Generation

In qualitative research, the data generation tools are the means used to generate data during the study (Ruslin et al., 2022). In this study, mobile audio recording devices were used to record the in-depth interviews with the postgraduate students. The interview schedules were compiled, and the researcher ensured the schedule was suitable for students and did not coincide with their lectures or assessment dates. The schedule was confirmed with the students prior to conducting the in-depth interviews. The in-depth interview sessions formed part of the data generation sessions. It is important to have recordings of the interviews to guard against biases and serve as a record of the interview session (Tessier, 2012). The audio recordings from the interviews were thereafter transcribed which aided in the process of classifying the data generated.

3.8.1. Data Generation Tools

Wagner et al. (2012) describe data generation methods as the ways in which data is generated, collated, and interpreted. For this research study, data was generated by conducting in-depth interviews. The researcher engaged with the selected students based on the criteria mentioned earlier and asked them questions regarding the stress they experienced during their studies. This research study used open-ended, exploratory research questions to obtain more information from the students and to draw conclusions based on the findings. This research study is based on an exploratory research design. Exploratory research is inductive and incorporates the use of a theoretical framework (Maree, 2021).

In-depth Interviews

According to Du Plooy Cilliers et al., (2021), interviews are regarded as valuable sources of information. With interviews, there is more flexibility in the research process as the researcher is able to ask a participant to clarify a point in order to gain a deeper understanding of the situation and the context. Despite having prepared the questions, the researcher also asked the postgraduate students unprepared questions based on their responses to the prepared responses. This study enlisted the use of in-depth interviews.

Mears (2012) suggests that in-depth interviews are purposeful interactions between a researcher and a participant where the researcher endeavours to find out more about a topic and to uncover the experiences of the participants. Hence, the researcher explored more about the postgraduate students' experience with stress. The data was generated to produce useful findings when the data was analysed. Ezer and Aksut (2021) state that the purpose of interviews is firstly to obtain answers to questions that have been asked and secondly to try to understand participants' experiences of the situation and how they feel about it. This research study tried to understand how students experienced their postgraduate studies in relation to stress and how they coped with stress. In-depth interviews were conducted to ascertain this information.

Some in-depth interviews conducted in qualitative research are semi-structured in nature. Semi-structured interviews comprise a series of questions that need to be discussed; however, there is no blueprint for specified answers (Carlson, 2020; Roberts, 2020). In-depth interviews are distinctive as they allow for communication on a one-to-one basis, which fosters interchange between the interviewer and interviewee (Ernest et al., 2023). In this study, the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews.

Berryman (2019) is of the view that language and social construction play an important role in interpreting information that is gathered from participants. The researcher adequately structured the interview questions to focus on how participants have experienced certain situations and why they engaged in their chosen form of behaviour. The researcher also ensured that the language and level of questioning were taken into consideration. The questions were simple to ensure participants understood the questions. The responses to the interview questions formed the basis for the themes that were derived from the study.

The process of conducting an in-depth interview includes a well-envisioned design, preparation of the interview questions, professional conduct, and attentive listening skills (Mears, 2012). It is important to have structure during the interview process for all relevant questions which pertain to the aim of the study to be achieved. The questions were prepared in advance for the in-depth interviews that were conducted. The prepared questions served as a guide to the discussion and follow-up questions were raised based on the specific responses received from the participants.

In-depth interviews consist of a series of open-ended questions based on the study topic, aimed at uncovering information and allowing both parties to explore additional related subject matter in greater detail (Muzari et al., 2022). The interviews were conducted on the Durban campus

for ease of access for the students. The interviews were conducted once they had concluded their lectures on campus and when it was convenient. The interviews were conducted in a reserved, quiet area in the form of an available lecture venue.

Eight students from the Durban campus, who made up the sample, were interviewed. On average, the interviews were approximately forty-five minutes long. The interviews were conducted once the students had completed their studies and after the second semester had concluded. Sufficient time had passed from the duration of their studies, for the students to be able to define their stress and coping strategies. The interview style used was an informal, conversational approach. The interview questions were aimed at finding out what stressors students experienced and how they coped with stress. The information derived from the interviews assisted in identifying common themes of stressors.

Document Analysis

Documents are existing written material that could be relevant to the undertaken study (Heck, 2011). Document analysis refers to analysing content. Documents contain content in the form of written text (Zireva, 2013). Document analysis comprises analysing different types of documents in a research study (Morgan, 2022). Document analysis occurs when a researcher gives meaning to a research topic based on the interpretation of documents (Tight, 2019; Karppinen & Moe, 2019).

Document analysis can take the form of primary and secondary methods. Primary data generation refers to the documents that are being analysed which were not created as transcripts of alternative data collection methods whereas; secondary data generation involves using documents that were compiled from other data collection methods such as biographies, dissertations, and newspaper editorials (Berg, 2009). This study used both document analysis methods: primary data generation was in the form of in-depth interviews, and secondary data analyses were the policies from the Higher Education institution.

In this study, the researcher used interview and document analysis to triangulate the information. The researcher used two of the policies from the private Higher Education institution namely, The Assessment Strategy and Policy and The Institutional Culture, Student Services and Academic Resource Allocation Policy was used to triangulate the data that was generated. These policies were the most applicable as they contained information regarding

counselling opportunities, academic support, and concessions offered to students. These documents aided in the analysis of the generated data. Once the data was generated and the themes identified, the researcher began to engage in triangulation. Triangulation is described as using different data generation methods to obtain information which will enhance the trustworthiness of the information provided (Saunders et al., 2012).

3.8.2. Data Generation Process

The data generation process took place over two weeks. The researcher ensured that participants were available and worked within their time constraints. The interviews were held in available lecture rooms at the private higher education campus in Durban. This formed the setting for the data generation. At the beginning of the interviews, students were informed about the research topic, the objectives of the study, and the purpose of the study. The participants were presented with, and completed, informed consent forms, and were informed of the right to participate. They were also informed that the interview would be recorded. Furthermore, I sought permission from the participants to record the interviews using an application on a mobile device. The interviews were about 30-40 minutes in duration. The data was generated from in-depth interviews as they are detail-orientated and provide thick, rich data. It is valuable to acquire in-depth information.

Jamshed (2014) claims that researchers should take into consideration the duration of the interview and the number of questions should be minimal with the aim of using probing questions to get more information. It is also important that the researcher and participants have a good understanding of each other and establish a good relationship. The researcher attempted to listen carefully to the participants and their experiences and did not dominate the interview. This interview approach assists in creating a process that is streamlined and productive and allows for participants to provide in-depth responses in the interview.

Table 3.2 - Data Generation Plan

<p>Questions for developing a data generation plan</p>	<p>A Data Generation Plan</p>
<p>Why was data generated?</p>	<p>The data was generated to provide a deeper understanding of what types of stressors students are exposed to and what coping mechanisms students use to cope with stress.</p>
<p>What was the research strategy?</p>	<p>The research strategy involved gathering in-depth evidence that was rich in meaning.</p>
<p>Who (or what) were the sources of the data?</p>	<p>The sources of data included in-depth interviews with postgraduate students. The Assessment Strategy and Policy and The Institutional Culture, Student Services and Academic Resource Allocation Policy were also used to generate data.</p>
<p>How many of the data were generated?</p>	<p>Eight interviews were conducted to generate the data.</p>
<p>Where was the data generated?</p>	<p>The data was generated on the campus of the selected private Higher Education institution. A venue was pre-booked so that there were no disturbances or interruptions.</p>
<p>How often were data generated?</p>	<p>The data was only generated once per student. I had one interview with each student.</p>
<p>How data was generated?</p>	<p>I prepared questions to ask the student so the interview was semi-structured.</p>
<p>Justify this plan for data generation. (Why was this the best way of generating data for these critical questions?)</p>	<p>This data generation plan was the most suitable as the interview was semi-structured and more questions were posed to the students based on their answers. In-depth interviews also yield more detailed responses as opposed to the qualitative approach.</p>

3.9. Method of Data Analysis

Islam and Aldaihani (2022) explain that qualitative data analysis involves the identification, interpretation, and examination of the themes and patterns that emerge from the generated data. The interviews were transcribed, and the data was categorised into themes. This analysis further goes on to ascertain how these themes and patterns can assist in understanding the phenomena in a more detailed manner. Qualitative data analysis is focused on making sense of the data as opposed to predicting outcomes. Qualitative data could be analysed inductively or deductively. The inductive approach to analysing data is when the identified themes are linked to the data set (Majumdar, 2022). The inductive approach is strongly data-focused.

In this study, the researcher analysed the generated data using inductive reasoning because it allowed the researcher to explore the participants' experiences with stress. The interviews were transcribed for analysis and further insights. Coding the data that has been generated comprises reading through the transcribed data and thereafter separating it into meaningful units of information (Nieuwenhuis, 2010). The coding process is used to bring together all the data associated with specific thematic ideas in order to draw similarities as well as comparisons within the information.

Bhattacharjee (2012) claims that the interpretive analysis of data is comprehensive and context-dependant. The generated data is not interpreted in isolation and the researcher is able to provide explanations that focus on participants' meanings. Thematic analysis helps to create a detailed and complex account of the data that has been generated (Majumdar, 2022). The data analysis method of thematic analysis contains very clear and specific guidelines which gives this method a form of scientific vigour. Although thematic analysis is a simple data analysis process, it is also rich in detail.

Majumdar (2022) claims that thematic analysis is the most applicable method for deep-rooted analysis as the data is interpreted thematically which transcends the surface level of the generated data. Additionally, thematic analysis provides an in-depth perspective of the social context. Thematic analysis is a method used in qualitative research to identify, analyse, and interpret the themes that arise from the patterns that have been identified (Clarke, Braun & Hayfield, 2015). In this study, the thematic analysis method was used to analyse the data. Thematic analysis is used to understand the generated data.

The themes and patterns identified during the study assist the researcher in reporting on the findings (Wagner et al., 2012). The aim of thematic analysis is to both summarise the

information and to identify and interpret the findings based on the answers to the research questions (Clarke, Braun & Hayfield, 2015). Once the data was generated, the researcher analysed the data by looking for the common themes of stressors and the common patterns of coping strategies students used during their studies. Themes are defined as constructed patterns that arise from the generated data (Islam & Aldaihani, 2022). Themes can also assist in answering research questions.

According to Braun and Clark (2006), there are six phases of thematic analysis, namely familiarising oneself with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing potential themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. See below:

Table 3.3 - Phases in thematic analysis

Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clark 2006, pp. 16-23)	
Phase 1	Familiarising yourself with your data
Phase 2	Generating initial code
Phase 3	Searching for themes
Phase 4	Reviewing themes
Phase 5	Defining and naming themes
Phase 6	Producing the report

Phase 1 involves becoming familiar with the finer details of the interview transcripts (Braun & Clark, 2006). The transcript and text from the research were read multiple times. In phase 2, initial codes begin to become developed. The generated data was coded line-by-line. While these codes are not designated as the themes of the research, they did aid the researcher in generating themes (Islam & Aldaihani, 2022). Researchers should aim to capture the essence of the text during phase 2.

Once the codes were identified, the researcher engaged in phase 3 to search for themes based on the initial coding (Braun & Clark, 2006). The researcher looked for patterns among the codes. Phase 4 is when the researcher organises the generated data around the themes. In this way, the theme is then finalised before phase 5, namely the theme definition and labelling phase. The identified themes should differ conceptually from each other so that the themes can be labelled and provide answers to the research questions. Phase 6, the last phase, involves producing the report which incorporates modifying the analysis according to the research problem.

3.10. Trustworthiness

According to Stahl and King (2020), trustworthiness in qualitative research studies entails the researcher maintaining the quality of the study and ensuring the research rigour is of an acceptable standard to be consistent with reality. Trustworthiness is closely linked to credibility in that both seek to ensure that findings are compatible with reality. There are four criteria of trustworthiness: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. All were adhered to in this study (Du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2021).

3.10.1. Credibility

Credibility refers to the accuracy of the interpretation of the data by the researcher (Maree, 2021). It seeks to discover the congruency of the findings with reality. Credibility is enforced when the researcher and participants spend significant amounts of time together to establish a good relationship. In this study, the researcher endeavoured to get to know the students during the interview process. The credibility of the study is increased by the use of triangulation which involves using multiple sources of information to identify patterns (Stahl & King, 2020). The researcher triangulated the data that was generated with the student policies from the private higher education institution such as the Institutional Culture, Student Services and Academic Resource Allocation Policy which offers counselling to students who feel stressed.

3.10.2. Transferability

Transferability is how applicable the findings of the study are in relation to the theories of other studies that have been conducted (Du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2021). It involves applying the findings to contexts beyond the study. Transferability is useful, as the findings of the study can be applied to help other postgraduate students become aware of stress-related assistance that private higher education institutions offer. To achieve this, the researcher needs to provide thick descriptions of participants' experiences to allow the reader to transfer the findings (Bertram & Christiansen, 2020). The findings can assist other future studies in similar contexts.

3.10.3. Dependability

Dependability refers to the integrity of the process of data generation, data analysis, and the findings of the data (Du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2021). The researcher ensured that readers would have confidence in the reported findings by providing a vast amount of detail. The researcher also avoided bias when reporting the findings of the study as pseudonyms were used. This will lead to stakeholders being able to decipher whether the themes of the study can be trusted. The data analysis process was documented for others to establish how the researcher arrived at the findings (Maree, 2021).

3.10.4. Confirmability

Confirmability refers to the degree to which the findings of the research can be validated by other researchers (Bertram & Christiansen, 2020). According to Maree (2021), confirmability is the degree of neutrality and the extent to which the participants shape the findings of the study. The findings of the study should not include researcher bias or interest. To sustain confirmability, the researcher ensured that the generated data was accurate by reading the interview transcripts several times. There was also the use of a supervisor audit trail which ensured the quality of the findings and sought to establish trustworthiness by checking the actions and influences of the researcher.

3.11. Ethical Consideration

Research ethics are regarded as the moral and professional conduct of the researcher, which encompasses personal integrity (Du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2021). Bryman and Bell (2014) classify ethical principles in four areas that need to be taken into consideration, namely, harm to participants, lack of informed consent, invasion of privacy, and whether deception is involved. The study should not cause physical or emotional harm to the participants. In this study, the researcher ensured that participants were not subject to harm as the interviews were conducted on campuses that were safe and had sufficient security. Moreover, the questions that were asked, only related to the topic of the study and I did not ask any other personal questions that would cause emotional harm. The interviews were conducted in a polite and professional manner which was devoid of inflicting emotional harm on the participants. Lack of informed

consent relates to the participants being adequately informed of the research process so they are aware of what will be taking place.

Invasion of privacy refers to the researcher not having a right to invade the participant's privacy (Bryman & Bell, 2014). This study did not intrude on student's privacy as the questions were open-ended and students had the autonomy of how much information they wished to divulge. Students did not have to disclose any information concerning their personal experiences if they did not want to. Deception transpires when the researcher presents their research in a different way to which it will actually unfold (Bryman & Bell, 2014). This occurs when participants are led to believe something contrary to what will take place. Students were only asked questions which related to the purpose of the study.

According to McBurney and White (2010), validity in the research context refers to the researcher's conclusion being correct. This implies a correspondence between the findings and the occurrences in the world. Validity refers to whether an indicator measures what it set out to initially measure (Bryman & Bell, 2014). In this study, students' perception of stress is explored. To ensure validity, the researcher has gone through various studies relating to stress and coping to evaluate if the findings of those studies coincide with the current study.

Reliability refers to the level of consistency of circumstances that exist wherein the same result is evident on multiple occasions (McBurney & White, 2010). It also seeks to uncover if the study is stable and if the measure is stable over time (Bryman & Bell, 2014). The reliability of the study can be measured against similar studies conducted previously. Reliability and validity are closely linked. If the measure is not reliable, it cannot be valid. If the measure is unstable, it will not provide a valid measure.

Prior to the commencement of the study, the researcher had to first obtain the gatekeeper's permission letter from the selected Higher Education institution where the study was conducted and secondly receive ethical clearance from the University of KwaZulu-Natal. The participants were provided with informed consent forms to confirm their participation in the study. Participants should not be harmed during the study and their human rights should not be violated or breached. Therefore, the participants were made aware of the option of withdrawing from the study at any point. Participants' names were kept confidential as pseudonyms were used. The researcher asked the participants for permission to record the interview session before conducting the research interview. The participants were also informed that audio recordings would be kept in a secure place.

3.11.1. Anonymity and Respect

Kang and Hwang (2023) assert that anonymity in research is the process whereby the participant's identity is concealed and not published. Measures are put into place to protect participants, such as using pseudonyms to guarantee anonymity. It is important to maintain anonymity in research studies to protect participant's privacy and ensure data integrity is upheld.

3.11.2. Beneficence

Beneficence, a key principle in research ethics, is explored in various contexts. Barrios et al. (2022) and Pieper (2022) highlight that beneficence is important in research as it minimises risk and maximises benefits to the research participants. One of the benefits of this research study is that participants will be provided with the findings of the study.

3.11.3. Informed Consent

It is important to provide participants with the opportunity to be informed about the study so they can decide if they wish to participate (Millum & Bromwich, 2021). Informed consent includes disclosing relevant information about the study and allowing participants to make a voluntary decision about their participation (O'Sullivan et al., 2021). The researcher provided consent forms and informed participants they were not forced to be included in the study. The participants were not misled about the purpose of the study. The participants were informed that they were not obligated to participate in the study and could withdraw from the study at any time.

3.12. Data Management

The data generated from this study is safely stored electronically and was only used for this study. The recordings were done with an online recording and transcribing application on a mobile device. The data was only stored electronically and the information will be destroyed five years after the conclusion of the study. Any hard copy information, such as the consent forms, has been safely secured and will be destroyed after the thesis has been completed. The

reason for the high level of security is to protect participants' identities and to ensure that the principle of confidentiality is maintained at all times.

3.12.1. Problems Experienced and Limitations of the Study

Some of the challenges I encountered while conducting this research included selecting eight postgraduate students. I had a list of eligible postgraduate students who met the requirements for this study however, upon contacting them I found that some of the students were not available to be interviewed. The other issue was that some students confirmed that they would participate in the study and then contacted me a few days later to inform me that they would no longer be available to participate in the study. As a result of this, I had to go through the list of students again and contact other students to find out if they would be available.

On the day of the interview, one participant was unwell and we rescheduled. In terms of time, rescheduling became challenging as I had allocated a period of weeks in which to complete the interview process and it was difficult to find a suitable time for both myself and the participant. I was able to overcome this challenge and the participant was very accommodating with working around the preferred timelines. As a researcher, I had to be agile, adaptable, compassionate, and understanding of participants' circumstances. These characteristics enabled me to ensure a relatively smooth interview process.

3.13. Conclusion

This chapter discussed the research methods used to conduct this study. The qualitative research method was selected. This research study took the form of an exploratory case study, and the interpretivist research paradigm was selected. Eight participants were chosen and interviewed through in-depth interviews. When conducting the study, ethical considerations were taken into account. The next chapter will deliberate on data presentation, analysis, and discussion of findings.

4. CHAPTER 4 - DATA PRESENTATION, ANALYSIS, AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

4.1. Introduction

This chapter details the analysis of the findings of the study, as well as the viewpoints of all participants involved. The central focus of this chapter is on the perceptions of stress and coping of postgraduate students at a private Higher Education institution in Durban, KwaZulu, Natal. The chapter will also analyse the research data that was generated. In this study, in-depth interviews were used to generate data from the participants, and this provided information about how postgraduate students experienced and coped with stress during their studies. Data was also generated from documents in the form of policies from the institution such as the Assessment Strategy and Policy and the Knowledge of the Institutional Culture, Student Services and Academic Resource Allocation Policy.

The purpose of data generation was to answer the research questions of this study. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data and to ascertain common themes and patterns that emerged. When the research was conducted, participants were informed, in detail, about the study. Creswell (2013) claimed that a study's credibility can be adhered to by using direct quotes from the participants. In the findings, I have used direct quotes to provide rich data and further insight into all participants' experiences during their postgraduate studies. Four themes have been identified and are explained in relation to the research objectives.

I will engage in thematic analysis to unpack the data acquired from the in-depth interviews of the participants. The participants' responses to the research questions informed the themes and sub-themes that emerged from the data. Upon analysing the data, four themes and seventeen sub-themes were identified for further analysis. In the ensuing discussion, I address each of these themes by drawing from the responses of the participants and relevant literature to support students' claims. The themes highlight the experiences of all participants and their descriptions of stress and coping strategies.

Table 4.1 - Themes and Subthemes

THEMES	SUB-THEMES
<p>Theme 1: Stressors experienced by the postgraduate participants</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transition from undergraduate studies to postgraduate studies • Time management • Academic workload • Difficulty with the Research module • Fear of the future • Personal life issues • Financial stress • Living away from family
<p>Theme 2: Coping strategies used by postgraduate students</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Family/friends support system • Socialising • Procrastination • Positive mindset • Physical activities
<p>Theme 3: Reasons why coping strategies are useful</p>	
<p>Theme 4: Other issues emerging from Data</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Description of postgraduate studies • Counselling support • Academic support • Support that the institution can provide

4.2. Theme 1: Stressors experienced by the postgraduate participants

In response to the first critical question (*What are the key stressors among postgraduate students at a private Higher Education institution?*), eight sub-themes have emerged. According to Zegeye et al. (2018), the existence of stress is evident when stressors are present. The students have elaborated on the different types of stressors they experienced. A key theme that emerged from the participant interview sessions was predominantly their experience of stress when transitioning from undergraduate to postgraduate studies. All participants in my study also expressed concern with the academic workload.

The Transactional Model of Stress aligns with the themes experienced in this section. As Lazarus and Folkman (1984) identified, stressors cause an imbalance in the individual which influences their wellbeing. The stressors identified emerged from the data generated through the in-depth participant interviews. Students were asked which key stressors caused them to experience stress during their postgraduate studies and shared some of the factors that made them feel overwhelmed and stressed.

4.2.1. Transition from undergraduate studies to postgraduate studies

All participants in this study foregrounded the issue of transitioning from undergraduate to postgraduate studies. This seems to be critical to the students as they felt overwhelmed by the amount of work required in their postgraduate studies. This is a confirmation of the existing view that students have more demands placed on them during postgraduate studies which was explained in Chapter Two by Langtree et al. (2018). Similarly, Evans et al. (2018) claim that the transition from undergraduate to postgraduate studies is a challenging and complex process for both undergraduate and postgraduate students. This transition is a dynamic process that involves both academic and emotional challenges, such as self-doubt in their ability to succeed, anxiety, and difficulty incorporating critical thinking into academically related assessments (McPherson et al., 2017). One of the participants struggled with the transition and found it quite stressful. Tezlyn uttered:

“And I think I’ve realized that I struggled a lot with transition. So, like the transition from high school to university was hectic.”

Similarly, Liam also mentioned that transitioning from undergraduate to postgraduate studies was emotionally challenging:

“...was a bit overwhelming at first...”

Along similar lines, O'Donnell et al. (2009) argue that the transition is further complicated by the heterogeneity of postgraduate students coupled with the ever-evolving nature of postgraduate teaching and learning. This is emulated by Chad's sentiments:

“... I think one adjustment is that it was more interactive. We were teaching the class in my honours management programme. They were teaching us to be more interactive with our environment or classmates in terms of the business world, so that's pretty helpful in terms of that.”

Some participants highlighted that it was difficult to transition from undergraduate to postgraduate because of the pressure of required increased critical thinking. The level of work that is required at a postgraduate level is more in-depth and challenging. Thabo felt that there was an immense difference as he stated:

“But then, after a couple of my assignments and assessments I realised the difference between undergrad and postgrad which is like the level of critical thinking and like work required to produce a decent quality of work, like there's quite a chunk there.”

In some cases, students do not initially anticipate that transitioning from undergraduate to postgraduate studies can be demanding, however, once they begin their postgraduate studies, they experience stress. This claim is supported by Maxine who explained:

“I think from third year to honours is a big jump and I don't think people realize it until you start doing honours. I think just the level that you're expected to produce an honours is a lot more than at third year, which makes sense because it's a whole degree that you're doing in one year. But I think that is something that shocked a whole lot of us including me.”

These statements are a clear indication that students find transitioning from undergraduate to postgraduate studies stressful. They indicated that they were initially overwhelmed and stressed when they began their postgraduate studies. There is a vast amount of literature that supports this position as they indicate that students feel stressed once they transition from undergraduate to postgraduate studies (Langtree et al., 2018; Bunney, 2017; Sanagavarapu & Abraham, 2020).

4.2.2. Time Management

Several studies have highlighted the considerable effect of time management on the stress experienced by postgraduate students as mentioned in Chapter Two. According to the study Sallehuddin's et al. (2019) study, there are compelling reasons to argue that there is a positive relationship between time management and stress, academic workload, and performance. This is further supported by Gupta & Chitkara (2018) who acknowledge the importance of time management to reduce academic stress and thereby improve academic performance. Kandhal Yazhini et al. (2021) further underscored the importance of the presence of time management, as the lack thereof has the possibility of leading to academic stress and frustration. Based on the studies, it is evident that time management plays a critical role in the academic success of postgraduate students.

Students struggle to find the balance between their studies and the management of their time which then causes them to feel stressed. The lack of time management can place further stress on students especially, with their academic performance. One of the participants mentioned that time management was their biggest stressor. As put by Thabo:

“I think time management was the biggest challenge. Sometimes for me, because I was doing certain things again, considering I was redoing postgrad first semester, because in second semester, I realized what I was doing bad and then I managed to pass second semester.”

Tezlyn also emphasised the struggle of managing time during her studies:

“The other thing is that my time management wasn't the best. So yeah, that was quite stressful to deal with. It's one of those things that you're trying to balance, you know, putting things aside for a second and just focusing on the task that needs to happen. Yeah, I think that was the biggest one.”

Numerous studies have investigated postgraduate students' experiences when working while studying. Sallehuddin's et al. (2019) findings showed that students' workload combined with stress has a significant impact on their academic performance. Three of the participants were working whilst they were studying and Tezlyn reported that working and studying was particularly stressful for her, as she tried to find the academic balance:

“I was bartending on weekends. So that was my Friday to Sunday and then Monday to Friday it was lectures so it was very full. I really didn’t enjoy the managers that I had. They really weren’t understanding of the fact that I was an honours student. So you know, if I said I can’t work this weekend, I haven’t exam Tuesday, they would say, Well, you’ve got Thursday, Sunday and Monday to study for your exam on Tuesday.”

Simultaneously working and studying places pressure on students to manage their time between work and also completing assessments and attending lectures. Some of the students view managing their time as a stress. Zoey explained that she has been working multiple jobs during the year while completing her postgraduate studies. This is illustrated in the following excerpt:

“I aupair and I work in marketing at a business coaching agency. So, I work for two different coaches, and I do all of their social media and marketing. And then I do social media and marketing for my mom and her company. So, four jobs and studying is insane.”

As outlined in the Transactional Model of Stress, the perception that the person has of the situation is extremely important in understanding how severe the stress might be to that person. In this circumstance, Zoey felt extremely stressed because she viewed having four jobs as highly stressful while trying to study.

Rockman et al. (2022) emphasised the challenges that postgraduate students face whilst trying to juggle employment which include financial constraints, physical burnout, and psychological distress. Support, motivation, and time management are important factors in achieving success. Maxine supported this claim with her statement:

“I had a lot of external stress in the beginning of the year because I got two job opportunities part time, which obviously added stress because trying to study and work is hectic. So working was necessary, you can’t avoid that. And then on top of that, you know trying to fit in college when you have a job. It’s hard to find that balance, especially when you have deadlines and college exams and all of that stuff as well.”

According to the Transactional Model of Stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), stress is not only founded by external circumstances but instead is a result of the interaction between individuals and their environments. Similarly, these postgraduate students encountered work as a stressor due to the interaction between themselves and their working environments.

4.2.3. Academic Workload

The study conducted by Yusoff et al. (2010) lends support to the claim that postgraduate students often experience significant stress and one of the major stressors, is the pressure to perform well academically. Similarly, the findings of this study suggest that academic workload is a major concern as six of the eight participants cited this as one of their major stressors. The consequences of stress experienced by postgraduate students can be serious and it could have a negative effect on their academic performance (Brown et al., 2016).

The Transactional Model of Stress asserts that the primary cognitive appraisal process is triggered when a person perceives a situation to be harmful to their wellbeing (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). In this case, students assessed their situation and perceived it to be stressful due to the constant workload that was required of them. Due to them perceiving the situation to be stressful, they reacted with panic, fear, and uncertainty.

When participants were asked about the challenges they faced as postgraduate students, Thabo reported the following statement relating to the academic workload:

“It made me nervous, so to say because it was like now, each time I’ve gotten an assignment or something, it requires a lot of my focus and getting in depth with the work and so it was only stressful considering them.”

The abovementioned statement from Thabo is congruent with the premise of the Transactional Model of Stress, in that, after he viewed his situation, he began to feel nervous. This was part of the process of the primary cognitive appraisal process being activated.

Chad also experienced the stress of academic pressure during his studies. He said that:

“I think the challenges were mainly the assignments were pretty long. Well, it did stress me out because you’re sitting at the laptop and you’re thinking I don’t know what I am saying.”

Liam faced difficulties with the time frame associated with assignments and the deadlines thereof. He said that:

“Some of the challenges I guess it would be the pressure that came with submitting on time for certain for certain assignments.”

Esther also described how she struggled with the academic workload as she said that:

“I think the academic presentations was stressful, because I struggled a lot with speaking in front of a lot of people. In terms of the workload, the actual academic part of it, I battled with that.”

Muurlink et al. (2011) assert that stress experienced by postgraduate students is intensified by the lack of assessment clarity as well as the workload. Zoey’s statement below is in line with Muurlink’s assumptions:

“I think, sort of the way the assessment is changed, the structure, you know we have a lot of, although they’re not essay questions, so we would only get 3000 words essays to write which is not what we had in our undergraduate studies. It was very different. So, I think the expectation, we were not like aware of what was really expected of us. So, I think that was quite difficult, like the formatting of the essays. Yeah, I think we weren’t aware of what the expectation really was, and no one could give us like a clear outline of sort of what they wanted from us. So, I think that was that was very challenging.”

Hannah struggled with the workload and experienced difficulty with how close the assignment submission deadlines were during the semester. She expressed her concern as follows:

“I think, definitely I underestimated the workload. Because there are no tests in honours. It’s just the final exam, but the assignments are so work heavy, you don’t realize it, you’ll look at it and think oh, it’s just a normal assignment like you’ve done in your undergrad, but they are so work heavy, so content heavy, that you really can’t leave it to the last minute like you would maybe in undergrad. You really have to start looking at it at least a week in advance just so that you’re not stressing yourself out when it comes closer to the submission date.”

Various factors have led to postgraduate students feeling pressure to perform well. McCartney (2019) discovered that postgraduate students feel pressure to perform well and as a result experience heightened levels of stress during the course of their studies. Hadi & Muhammad (2019) emphasised that in, some cases, postgraduate students have the pressure to perform well based on the considerable influence of personal, family, and institutional factors. These studies suggest that owing to an amalgamation of personal, academic, and environmental factors postgraduate students feel the pressure to perform well. Some of the pressure to perform well is internal and comes from students’ desire to excel in their studies. Hannah said:

“I think the one thing with honours specifically is that there’s a lot of pressure, I don’t know if it’s like internal pressure, but it did for me, it definitely wasn’t external. You put a lot of pressure on yourself to do like amazing the first time around, and if you don’t, you get really disappointed and that’s really stressful. And that’s definitely what I had with like my first assignments and it was getting kind of in the higher 50s, which is not what I was aiming for at all. And like hearing everyone else. They were bothered about their work, but they were getting high 60s And I was like, Oh my gosh, am I going to fail this whole degree.”

When asked what one of the major stressors was, Liam said that it was the pressure to perform exceptionally well:

“The primary source would be to produce good results.”

Esther was asked if she had encountered the fear of failure during the year and she confirmed that she was fearful of failing with the following statement:

“I was very overwhelmed at times due to the fear of failing.”

These students have placed pressure on themselves to pass their modules as they were fearful of failing. When specifically applying the Transactional Model to Stress to postgraduate students, it is essential to include how their academic environment and requirements may shape their perception of stress. The findings of the study suggest that these postgraduate students did not anticipate an increase in the workload. Consequently, some students underscored the workload as one of their major stressors during their postgraduate studies.

4.2.4. Difficulty With the Research Module

Acheampong (2021) is of the view that postgraduate students face multiple challenges with the research module. This is inclusive of difficulties in conceptualising a research topic, writing the research proposal, and reviewing the appropriate literature. It is noteworthy to report that Acheampong’s (2021) study showed that the challenges these students face are sometimes compounded by additional factors such as little engagement with supervisors; a lack of time management; and a lack of research materials. Students who are exposed to the aforementioned challenges often feel stressed and disengage from the research process.

In this study, five of the eight participants indicated that they struggled with the research module. This is a significant number of participants who were uncertain of the research process and thereafter disliked the research module. The students wanted more guidance with research. They also wanted a Research lecturer who was supportive in nature and approachable. They found that their Research lecturer did not provide them with sufficient support during the research process.

Thabo experienced stress due to the difficulty of the research module:

“Research was stressful! Because it was like it’s a module where it’s boring. You know, it’s just boring, like nothing interesting because everybody’s doing their own individual topic. So as much as you can exchange what you’ve discovered from your different topics or anything in your focus groups that you have with your supervisor, the actual module, like the class itself, the research class, I was struggling to stay focused.”

Some of the students expressed that Research was a difficult module due to the complexities of the module and they did not know what was expected of them during the research process. The uncertainty of the research requirements caused the students to feel stressed. Additionally, this was the first time that the students were exposed to the research process as they had not done a practical research project in their undergraduate studies. Tezlyn encountered challenges with the research process as well as the contents of the research module. She said that:

“The most stress I felt was to do with my actual research study. But the research study was something that I’ve never experienced before. So when you do research in your undergrad, it’s very theoretical.”

The students were expressive of their apathy toward the research module because of the stress they felt when conducting research. Maxine did not enjoy the research module. She expressed her disinterest in the module as she exclaimed that:

“I always hated research like from the beginning!”

Chad also struggled with the research process as he said:

“Sometimes the research was challenging, because it’s the first time we ever did interviews in the degree. So, it was a challenge to get the interviews and then do an analysis of it.”

Some postgraduate students face stressors in the research module due to inadequate support from their supervisors and uncertainty about how to conduct the research process (Silinda & Brubacher, 2016; ul abdin Rind et al., 2023). It is essential for the research supervisor to guide and direct the students during the research process. This claim is further supported by the following assertion by Esther who struggled with her relationship with her supervisor and explained that there was a lack of support from the supervisor:

“And for my supervisor, she didn’t really help me when I needed help. And when I asked her what should I change? What can I do? And she wouldn’t, tell me what to do. So, I was lost. I didn’t know what to do it. I didn’t want to like keep on asking. So yeah, that was also a bit stressful.”

4.2.5. Fear of the Future

Various studies have found that postgraduate students encounter an array of uncertainties in life. Additionally, they have fears about their imminent future, including the instability of the employment market, fear of failing modules and not passing their qualification, and the effects of the ever-changing economic climate (Wadman et al., 2017; Woolston, 2015; Butler-Rees & Robinson 2020). Students have a definitive structure and routine whilst they are studying, and their main focus is to complete their qualification. However, once students reach the end of their academic journey, questions about their future start to emerge which then leads to students feeling stressed.

Fifty per cent of the participants in this study felt fear of the future and were uncertain about whether they would obtain employment. When Thabo was asked if he was concerned about the future, he reported the following:

“I think that’s what ruins me the most. Okay, so I can place that stress at 10 out of 10. The uncertainty was stressful. To be the best version of yourself, was living for the future which is one of the reasons why we come to study. So now when you are failing at campus now you kind of translate that to me being a failure in life.”

Graduates are often faced with the option to continue studying or find employment. Chad had various thoughts about what would happen in the future as he navigated the options that were available to him. He said that:

“I am actually fearful of that now. During the year, I was thinking, I’ve been there last year, what do I do? Do I want to go into this working world? Because my dad has a business. And I’m thinking do I go there or go into the working world to start my own thing? So, I’m trying to find my feet, where I stand. So that’s my main stress.”

In the same manner, Hannah was highly concerned about finding employment after completing her degree. She expressed her concern as follows:

“Well, whilst doing my honours, I started looking for jobs at the same time because the last thing you want to do is just be sitting for the whole year doing nothing. And when I started looking, a lot of the graduate programs are actually already closed. And I was shocked because I had just gotten the degree. Yeah, so I think also feeling like you’re behind as well definitely stresses you out.”

Concerns about the future and employment can have a substantial impact on the students’ wellbeing (Butler-Rees & Robinson, 2020). Tezlyn commented on the anxiety that she was experiencing due to this:

“That was a big thing for me and really stressed me. And now I’m starting to transition into being like a working adult. So, that’s also coming with quite a bit of anxiety and like fear of the future.”

4.2.6. Personal Life Issues

There are a range of personal life issues that affect postgraduate students and contribute to increased stress levels. Some of the stressors experienced by postgraduate students include issues with social life, relationships, and family, as they try to find their identity while studying (Mazumdar et al., 2012). Thabo described his personal life issues as follows:

“Personally, it was like the pressures of life that just came with life, as any other human being dealing with what you’re dealing with what life throws at you at the same time and now understanding that you still have a commitment at college and then trying to trying to figure out life, so I think that’s where I have failed to make a balance. And then that was stressing me out because I know how important it is and what it takes for me to be here.”

When Zoey was asked if she had personal issues whilst she was studying she reported the following:

“Yes, more coming from home to the personal side of things. And then in my third year, I was top of my class, and then with all the stress from my home life, obviously that significantly dropped my marks. So, then that was also very stressful.”

Maxine had personal identity issues which she described as follows:

“I think all students go through a stage of, in this time, like not knowing who they are as people and I think that definitely came into play. Two years ago, I figured out that I’m into girls, so I started dating a girl and that was a big deal for my parents and my mom like disowned me for two months like that was an added stress. So I think that came into play a lot this year, especially when it came to work, because I realized how many people judge you for that automatically.”

4.2.7. Financial Stress

Smathers et al. (2022) claim that postgraduate students experience financial stress, which in turn impacts their academic experience and influences the decisions they make during the course of their studies. The stress students experience can hinder academic performance and lead to psychological concerns (Adams et al., 2016). Maxine describes the financial stress that she experienced and the expenses she incurred:

“Definitely, I mean, I live in my own flat. So, I pay for Wi-Fi, rent, water and fuel for my car. I also pay for food and sports. I think I’m going to have to say financial stress. If my Wi-Fi, isn’t paid, then I don’t have Wi-Fi, like that’s the bottom line and without Wi-Fi, comes so many other problems. I can’t get onto college without money. I can’t buy food, which is something that you obviously need without money. Without money, I wouldn’t be able to play squash and squash is what saved a lot of my stress like breakdowns a lot of the time so I think financial is definitely the main stressor because without money, the rest of the stuff crumbles.”

Similarly, Liam claimed that financial stress was a concern to him:

“You’re paying a lot of money even though I’m not paying it. My parents did pay it. So, I felt that burden a little bit from an emotional point of view. Okay, so I think financial pressure is a bit more stressful.”

4.2.8. Living Away From Family

Silinda & Brubacher (2016) suggests that students who live away from their families indicate this as a significant stressor. The initial stages include adjusting to a new environment which can be notably difficult, as students experience heightened levels of stress because of loneliness or missing home (Brown, 2016). Two of the participants lived away from their parents and explained the stress that they experienced. Maxine expressed how difficult it was staying away from her parents and what her experience entailed:

“So, I live here in Durban by myself. My parents don’t live here and that was stressful. Being away from our parents is hard, I can obviously call them and they come and visit quite a lot but not being able to go home and like scream not at my mom but to my mom about my day, which has happened a lot in school. Yeah, that was hard because my mom and I are very similar. So I would get home and throw a tantrum at home and my mom would make me tea and she’d be like, it’s going to be fine. And to go home and not have anybody to like throw that on.”

This stress is further exacerbated for international students, who encounter acculturative stress because they are trying to acclimatise to the new environment as well as adjust to being away from home (Myers-Walls et al., 2011). Thabo was an international student and his viewpoint of being away from family was the following:

“It was all about making the best of the environment whilst being away from family”

The students who live away from their families have the added pressure of having to cope without support from their families which causes stress. They are negatively affected emotionally as they do not have a support structure that is close by.

4.3. Theme 2: Coping Strategies Used by Postgraduate Students

Coping mechanisms aid in overcoming or reducing stress experienced by students (Ganesan et al., 2018). Drawing from the interviews with study participants, the research revealed five coping strategies the postgraduate students used during their studies. The five identified themes will be discussed in response to the second critical research question: *How do postgraduate students cope with stress?* The Transactional Model of Stress involves the students' appraisal of the circumstance, the available coping strategies, and the outcome of selecting and using that specific coping strategy. In this study, the coping strategies that were used by the students were investigated and this corresponds to the Transactional Model of Stress which emphasises that coping strategies are an essential part of managing stress.

When students feel stressed, there is an imbalance in their psychological wellbeing and action is required to restore the balance. The balance can be restored by using coping strategies (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). As discussed in Chapter Two, Lazarus and Folkman (1984) claim that coping can either be problem-focused or emotion-focused. In this study, the participants used either the problem-focused coping or emotion-focused coping strategies which will be elaborated on further.

4.3.1. Family/friends Support System

Some postgraduate students have a family or friend support system they use as a coping strategy to manage their stress levels. Enlisting the support of friends or family is a form of emotion-focused coping, where a person is dependent on support from family or friends to deal with the problem. Yusoff et al. (2019) found that there is importance in maintaining relationships which help postgraduate students cope with stress. Segoro and Hasanah's (2015) study found that family and friends play an essential, supportive role to students and that the problem-focused coping strategy illustrated in the Transactional Model of Stress was the most useful. The importance of social support as a coping strategy is evident from the studies pertaining to postgraduate students.

The study shows that the support of family and friends is one of the major coping strategies for postgraduate students as six of the participants indicated that they used this coping strategy. This shows that students prefer to use emotion-focused coping as opposed to problem-focused coping. Thabo expressed how important his family was to him:

“Conversations with my sister who’s been through my shoes and has studied before was helpful. She was like, more or less my support system.”

During difficult times the support of friends is sometimes undervalued; however, Tezlyn explained how the support of her friends was beneficial to her:

“I really enjoyed something on the non-academic side and that was that my class was very together. So, we would help each other, we’d have a lot of class discussions, we would meet outside of class which I’ve never had in a college class before. So, we were really able to like lean on each other whenever we needed whenever assignments were getting stressful or the time management was becoming an issue.”

Tezlyn further mentioned that the support of her family and friends played a vital role in helping her cope with stress. Her mother was also completing a postgraduate qualification whilst Tezlyn was enrolled for her honours qualification. She expressed that she would bond with her mother as they would both discuss their experiences with their supervisors. She elaborated on this as follows:

“Yeah, I think the other thing is that my family is also really supportive. I had a lot of people around me, sort of going through the same thing and just being able to talk about the things that were stressing me out when they were stressing me out was quite helpful.”

Maxine also confirmed that friends in her class helped her to cope with stress:

“I had the base class where we’ve all been together since first year so we were all really close that helped a lot.”

Similarly, Omar et al. (2020) further underscored the significance of friend and family support to cope with stress during postgraduate student studies. Hannah also emphasised this importance in the following statement:

“But thankfully, I did have a good group of friends in the honours class already that helped me out wherever I needed to. So that helped stabilize me as well. Just meeting the new people and the support from them was helpful.”

Liam leaned on the support of not only friends but stated that family was also important:

“I did get support from my friends and also from my family. They were a good support structure.”

When Esther was asked how she coped with stress, she said that:

“I would be quite good to go for a drive or take my sister out for lunch. I wouldn't want to be in the house.”

4.3.2. Socialising

Socialising plays a key role in the lives of postgraduate students, in terms of how they cope with stress and challenges during their studies. Vasileiou et al. (2019) found that students used problem-solving coping strategies in the form of social interaction which was significant in helping students cope with stress. Postgraduate students' wellbeing and mental health are impacted by their choice of coping style in order to deal with stress, as well as the social support they received (Wang et al., 2018). The study outcomes suggest that postgraduate students use drinking and socialising as a coping strategy.

Thabo claimed that drinking and partying were not good:

“I think partying became slightly excessive, if I am being honest.”

Tezlyn said that she did engage in drinking occasionally in order to assist her in coping with stress:

“I think I would say sometimes substance abuse, but I don't think it was abuse. It was just a university student, you know, indulging every once in a while as a way of making sure that to take the edge off when I've had a really stressful week.”

Maxine explained how the excessive use of substances can have a negative effect on a person's behaviour and how she attempted to stay away from alcohol as she did not want to become addicted to it. She stated that:

“Towards the middle of the year I used alcohol and when it was August. I got to a point where I phoned my dad actually. And I was like Dad, I think I'm relying a lot on alcohol. And so for the whole of August I didn't drink at all just to prove to myself that I didn't need alcohol. So I don't think it ever got to a point where I was addicted to alcohol, but it definitely is an awesome way to get out.”

McLaughlin and Sillence (2018) claim that the support of peers and socialising creates a sense of community which helps students adjust and cope with stress. Chad supported this claim as he said:

“Yeah, a few times, I just met my friends at the bottom and chilled.”

When Hannah was asked if she spent time with her friends to help her cope with stress, she said:

“Yeah, for sure. Like whether that be just going out for lunch with a friend who are going to play tennis or literally just going to walk in the mall. Just as long as I wasn't in like a study setting it was okay.”

4.3.3. Procrastination

Ng and Lovibond (2020) and Naveed (2016) both indicate that postgraduate students use procrastination as a coping strategy, which showed a reduction in anxiety because students often experienced anxiety during the information-seeking process. These types of coping strategies are often used by postgraduate students to alleviate the stress and anxiety that they encounter (Deasy et al., 2014). Whilst there are some avoidance and procrastination strategies that are beneficial, there is also behavioural avoidance which can be regarded as a negative coping strategy because of the negative psychological effect that it has on individuals. It is essential that postgraduate students assess the coping strategies they use and reach out for assistance when required.

In Tahir's et al. (2022) study, ten coping strategies were identified, including procrastination, and the findings indicated that it is not always an effective coping strategy. Chow (2011) expressed the negative impact of procrastination on student's academic performance and that there is a need for the institution to identify students who procrastinate and assist them. Both these studies show how students rely on procrastination to cope with their studies.

Five of the eight participants shared similar sentiments about using procrastination as a coping strategy. This is a significant number of participants who procrastinated during their studies. The participants tried to avoid their work by procrastinating. Tezlyn described how she procrastinated:

“Definitely avoidance, sometimes because as much as I feel like I have my life together, I am a big procrastinator. So, it’s like, I know that when those two days before the submission comes around, I’m going to get to it done. But for those two weeks before, I will just sit and watch Netflix the whole day or just, sit and do everything under the sun except actively do the assignment.”

Zoey also procrastinated in order to cope with stress. This is illustrated in the following excerpt:

“I think just working through it and just kind of putting it on the back burner, like forgetting about it. Or just taking like a day to myself to just chill. See what I need to do, spend it on Tik Tok or watching series. I would say I do to get through the stress.”

Maxine often thought that if she only attempted her assessments closer to the due dates then she would still manage her time well, however, she experienced stress as the time to complete the tasks was insufficient and she underestimated how long it would take her to complete the tasks. Since she thought that she would have enough time to do the tasks, she delayed working on them. She said that:

“I’m very good at procrastination. If I started two weeks before an assignment was due, I would do a section and then be like, oh it’s fine, let me do this now and I’ll go back to it and then I would go back and then my work was blocked and blotchy.”

Chad shared similar sentiments to Maxine as he discovered that procrastinating resulted in less time to complete assessments which added to his stress. He said:

“There was 100% procrastination. Usually we will say this two-week assignment is due, I’ll do maybe a day, one day I’ll allocate to this particular module. It didn’t turn out like that, usually four days before we would end up doing this assignment.”

Similarly, Esther had the misconception that there would be sufficient time to complete assessments although she was procrastinating. She said that:

“I think procrastinate helped cope with stress. Like, the deadlines were all together, but also very far. So, I thought I had a lot of time. Yeah, just like push it to the end and then I just procrastinate.”

It is evident from these findings that these students did not anticipate how long each assignment would take them to complete. They were of the assumption that it could be done a few days

before the due date but they also experienced that multiple assessments were due around the same time. Inadvertently, as a result of their procrastination, they experienced heightened stress.

4.3.4. Positive mindset

The findings of the study conducted by Nicklin et al. 2019 depicted that the coping strategy of having a positive mindset often resulted in decreased stress levels and increased wellbeing of students (Nicklin et al., 2019). Wu et al. (2020b) identified that resilience and being able to work through challenging situations are regarded as a positive coping style which some students engage in during their studies. Pacheco and Kamble (2016) claim that there is significance in the role of optimism in stress and coping, and there is a positive relationship with coping strategies such as having a positive mindset. Khan (2023) also emphasised the importance of positive coping strategies with studious individuals more likely to engage in problem-focused coping.

Tezlyn had a positive mindset as she set about her work. She said that:

“You know, because it’s like from Friday afternoon to Sunday morning I’m working and then I’m sleeping for the rest of Sunday, and then I’m back at campus on Monday. But I think I just I really enjoyed the job. And I really enjoyed lectures. So, I think that having that balance of saying, you know what, I’m going to work really hard during the week and I’m gonna work really hard on the weekends, but when I have my day off, or when I have two days off, I’m gonna go and I’m gonna have a good time and be positive that things would work out.”

4.3.5. Physical Activities

The findings of the study support the existing literature when revealing that students engage in physical activities such as playing sports, walking, and going to the gym to cope with stress. Problem-focused coping, as explained by Lazarus and Folkman (1984), is when a person tries to find a solution to the problem. Engaging in physical activities is a form of problem-focused coping which is a component of the Transaction Model of Stress. Some of the studies support the aforementioned claim, such as a study conducted by Ashraf et al. (2020) who found that

mild physical activity, such as walking, was significantly effective in decreasing academic stress among students. The claim of walking as a coping strategy is supported by the following assertions made by Maxine:

“I do a lot of walking along the promenade. There’s a cute little coffee shop there. I’ll get a coffee and go for a walk. A lot of the times, especially if I’m at home the whole day, if something gets too overwhelming, I just go down to the beach and get a coffee and walk like three or four kilometers pretty quickly. And then that’s like a mind reset for me and then I can get back to work. So definitely the walk and sports in general helped.”

Liam also engaged in physical activity such as walking in order to cope with stress. He said that:

“I would just like exercise and go take a walk outside, and listen to music.”

Similarly, Hamed et al. (2023) acknowledged that students sometimes engage in physical exercises to manage their personal and academic stress. This is supported by a statement from Zoey when she said:

“I would sort of generally horse ride, I also go to the gym. I think it takes my mind off of it.”

Playing sports can also assist in coping with stress. Maxine played sports to cope with stress. She said that:

“I have a really good support system that I play squash with. That’s my sports, which helped a lot. So, when I’m playing squash I’m not thinking about anything else, so for the hour that I’m on the squash court, nothing else matters.”

Chad went to the gym to help him cope with stressful situations. He said that:

“Gym was a good coping strategy. Or just to walk to clear my head. Usually what I’ll do is I’ll go play PlayStation or go play soccer. Yes, it’s a better coping thing because you know, you’re interacting with people also as well.”

Moeller et al. (2020) also highlighted the importance of physical activity which assists students to cope with stress. Research studies have also shown that physical activity, especially in the form of exercise, is regarded as an effective coping strategy for students, particularly

postgraduate students (Azizi, 2011). Physical activity reduces the reaction to stress and improves mood. From the abovementioned findings of the study, it is evident that physical activity can be a valuable coping strategy for postgraduate students.

4.4. Theme 3: Reasons Why Coping Strategies Are Useful

Some of the findings of research studies of postgraduate students have shown that coping strategies can alleviate stress. Datar et al. (2017) highlighted the role that coping strategies play in students' lives. Additionally, the use of good emotion-focused coping strategies from the Transactional Model of Stress is often associated with lower stress levels. As indicated in the preceding themes of how students coped with stress, it is evident that the students chose to mostly use emotion-focused coping strategies as they felt they were the most beneficial to them.

Based on all the coping strategies students used during their studies, they were also asked why those particular coping strategies were considered to be useful. This was one of the research questions that this study aimed to answer. Thabo explained that the coping strategy of the support of family and friends was useful. He said that:

‘I think that kind of kept my confidence intact. So, I had support from family was like the most positive.’

Zoey explained why the coping strategy of procrastination was useful. She said that:

“Yeah, the coping strategy was helpful because it also just leaves you to kind of sit with your thoughts and just think things through.”

Hannah explained how the coping strategy of the support of friends helped her. She said that:

“Yeah, definitely being with friends helped because when you're with other people specifically, I think they're also on the same page as you and let's not talk about academics and studies and stuff. Let's just have any conversation that doesn't concern that whatsoever. So, I think because you're on the same page as whoever else you're with and you're bound to speak about other things and it's just you take your mind off my studies completely.”

Maxine used the coping strategy of engaging in physical activity such as playing sports to cope with stress and she said that it was helpful:

“Definitely feel relaxed and it would help me sleep. I went through a stage where I wasn’t sleeping properly probably because of stress and because of our up and down stages of eating, not eating. But it definitely helped with a lot of things. If you angry can go hit a squash ball.”

Chad also used physical activities to cope with stress and found it to be useful. He said that:

“Going to gym did help it did ease it a bit because then I’m not focusing on the work, I’m doing something that’s also improving another person.”

Ganesan et al. (2018) and Ickes et al. (2015) have both stipulated the need for coping strategies to reduce stress levels and they have highlighted that social support is a key factor. In line with this, three of the participants supported the notion of social support. Liam said that:

“Walking with friends did alleviate the stress.”

Esther explained how going out helped her. She said that:

“I think just like, not being in the house and going out. Doing something to get my mind off it. It helped alleviate some of your stress and your pressure.”

Chad describes going out as providing relief:

“That’s like that’s more of an outing. It’s a relief thing.”

These coping strategies were useful as they helped to alleviate the stress that the students encountered. This is why the students chose to continue using these strategies to cope with stress. They found value in these coping strategies.

4.5. Theme 4: Other Issues Emerging from Data

4.5.1. Description of Postgraduate Studies

According to Shete and Garkal (2015), some of the significant stressors that heighten students’ stress levels include the pressure to perform well academically. Moreover, Zegeye (2018) also emphasised that stress is prevalent among postgraduate students, especially regarding the academic pressure that the students endure. Muurlink et al. (2011) have included a wider perspective by correlating stress experienced by postgraduate students to the pressure to

perform well, chronic overworking, and unclear academic expectations. It is important that higher education institutions address the issues associated with stress and coping of postgraduate students.

Postgraduate students often experience heightened levels of stress, primarily stemming from factors such as assessments, workload, and time constraints (De los Angeles Sanchez-Trujillo et al., 2022). The stress that these students experience can have a negative impact on their academic performance, and their campus life and relations with others have been important contributors (Abdullah et al., 2020). The effects of stress can be mitigated by enlisting coping techniques, such as reaching out to peers for social support and effective time management (Tirmizi, 2019). Notwithstanding, postgraduate students remain at risk of experiencing medium levels of stress, anxiety, and depression, which have strong correlations (Vasugi et al., 2019).

The participants provided the following accounts of their experiences relating to transitioning from undergraduate to postgraduate studies which was one of the predominant themes that emerged from the interviews. The students indicated this transition caused them the most amount of stress. They also described the level of stress that they encountered. Tezlyn said that:

“I would say it was a moderate level.”

Zoey explained the level of stress that she experienced. She felt extreme stress during her studies, especially with the transition from undergraduate to postgraduate requirements. She said that:

“It was stressful. I had a lot that happened in my personal life. It was definitely a lot harder than third year and kind of what we overall expected. Coming through from our Bachelor of Commerce to Honours, it was definitely very, very different. So that was also frustrating. And then due to things happened in my personal life, it was also like very stressful. I think it’s like, pressure from home. Pressures like this, not at school, but at varsity, you know, in terms of getting good grades in terms of passing the workload, making sure you like to get through everything. On a scale of one to ten I’d probably say like a solid eight. So, yeah, it was it was rough.”

Maxine's ethical clearance was denied and this caused her to feel extremely stressed. She described the stress as follows:

"So yeah, first year was good until the end of this first semester was good until the end of the semester when my ethical clearance got denied. Having my ethical clearance denied was a big stress because it made me feel like such a failure. Your stress can lead to so many different problems."

Chad explained the various types of stress that he encountered. He shared his thoughts on the level of stress that he experienced:

"I think the preparation was pretty extensive. They told us it's not like the first three years of your undergrad degree. And it was pretty hectic in the first semester because we were still adjusting. But overall, it was a very, very, very hard-working semester because they just introduced us into the whole honours system. Well, stress can come in different forms in terms of work pressure. You can have internal pressures such as job stress and family stress. The stress was a solid eight out of ten."

Liam faced high levels of stress during the course of his studies. Similarly to Maxine and Chad, he felt exceptionally stressed during the first semester. He explained how the academic pressure and the pressure to perform well were particularly felt in the first semester. He expressed that there was pressure to perform well in each module and ensure that he was up to date with the work required for all the modules. He said that:

"The first semester was a bit overwhelming at first with the large number of presentations we had and for certain due dates there was close where there was a bit of pressure. I would actually describe it as being quite a high level of stress at certain points. Specifically, when studying for exams. I think it was a high level of stress towards the end of the year, you're almost done. And you're under pressure to do well and just ensure that you officially get it over and done with. So there was a high level of pressure at that point."

Esther, alongside the other participants, experienced high levels of stress. She described it as follows:

“I think I underestimated postgrad, like last year, the lecturers would say, honours is difficult and then when I actually got into doing the work, I did have stress. So, the stress levels were relatively high.”

Thabo indicated that most of his stress was linked to the pressure to perform well which caused him to feel stressed. This is illustrated in the following excerpt:

“Sometimes the stress can be internal or external, depending on what the students’ environments is like and what they’re going through in life. You always have this pressure to perform at a certain level, and it could be quite toxic. I feel because you always want that distinction. Sometimes it’s fine to take your seventy percent and you still did well. It can be stressful.”

Similarly, Hannah experienced stress as she was under pressure to perform well. She said that:

“I think for everyone, the stress kind of differs, for me it’s honestly like almost academic validation. The stress was getting good marks, but also trying to aim for eighty percent, which is another stressor that I think a lot of people in post grad as well put on themselves. In first semester, the stress definitely picked up towards the end. I’d say the stress was six out of ten. At the end the stress was definitely an eight or nine out of ten.”

In particular, the Transactional Model of Stress suggests that stress is a dynamic, constantly changing process which involves reciprocal transactions between people and the environment they find themselves in. Moreover, this is pertinent to this study as these postgraduate students experienced stress whilst interacting in a higher education sphere.

4.5.2. Counselling support

According to various research studies, counselling can be a significant and helpful coping strategy for postgraduate students (Chiweshe et al., 2022; Mohangi & Olivier, 2023). Counselling is a problem-focused coping strategy that has been affiliated with positive outcomes (Prosek et al., 2022). As such, there are potential benefits to using counselling as one of the coping strategies for postgraduate students.

When the participants were asked if they were aware of the counselling sessions available on campus, all eight of the participants confirmed they knew of the counselling sessions. This is congruent with the aim of the institution to offer six primary counselling sessions to students which is in line with the institution's Institutional Culture, Student Services and Academic Resource Allocation Policy.

Thabo stated that he had been to counselling sessions previously however he did not attend any counselling sessions during his postgraduate studies, and he provided a reason for not using the counselling options available. He said:

"I've been to counselling before so I do understand the importance of therapy and self-care and talking to someone about it. But then because I felt accountable as well for failing. It's like I was punishing myself in a way to get through it."

The campus conducted multiple awareness campaigns to inform students of the available counselling sessions. Students are informed via information in the Student Handbook, orientation sessions, class visits, posters on campus, and activation drives in the quad area. This information was verified by two of the participants:

"I think the social committee, the campus and all those role players do a really good job of making sure that we know who the Student Wellness counselor is, and we can go and see her if we need to. So, I think they're out there, they do a really good job of making sure that you know that, that's an option." (Tezlyn)

"I've always seen the posters from first year." (Hannah)

The participants were asked if they made use of the counselling sessions on campus. Seven of the eight participants did not use counselling sessions despite being aware of their availability. Two of the participants indicated why they did not attend the counselling sessions. Tezlyn explained:

"I deal with a lot of anxiety just in general. A lot of it is social as well, and I just sort of had it in my mind that if I was going to see the counselor on campus, it was going to be more of an academic stress thing. And I didn't think that I was like struggling with my academic career. So, I did seek support. I did look for therapists but outside of a campus."

Chad did not make use of the counselling services available on campus as he believed that it would be better to rely on himself. He said that:

“I was like, you know, I can’t always rely on someone else to help me. So, I said, what I can solve it all myself and I managed.”

Maxine was the only student who went for a counselling session during her undergraduate studies. She did not make use of the counselling services during her postgraduate studies. She said that:

“I went once, not this year, though, so not this year.”

4.5.3. Academic Support

Various studies have highlighted the significance of academic support and assistance for postgraduate students. Connelly et al. (2021) claimed that there is a need for specific support during the different phases of the student’s academic journey. However, Lumadi (2021) and Asamoah (2019) both highlight the positive effects of technological assistance and student support services. Jeyaraj (2020) additionally emphasises the necessity for a structured academic framework which is inclusive of pedagogically encompassing writing support workshops, support from the research supervisor, and purposeful peripheral guidance. The institution from this study also has a writing centre which is available to postgraduate students. It is evident from the findings of these studies that there is value in providing structured and tailored academic support to postgraduate students.

The institution offers academic support to students as per the Knowledge of the Institutional Culture, Student Services and Academic Resource Allocation Policy. The academic team provides support workshops to students especially prior to assessments to ensure that the students are adequately prepared for the assessments. The policy also entails information about available tutorial sessions to assist students as they learn from other tutors. Academic staff members also engage in student consultation sessions whereby they meet with students on an individual basis to unpack the academic challenges they are grappling with.

The participants were asked if they were aware of the abovementioned academic support and all eight of the participants confirmed that they were aware of the academic support. This

affirmation is positive as the Higher Education institution has ensured that the students are informed of the counselling options. Thabo clearly stated:

“I am aware of all the structures in place to support students.”

Similarly, Tezlyn shared the same sentiments, indicating how the institutions attempted to make the students aware of the academic support available. She said:

“I think I remember earlier in the year there was just these two girls that were coming around and they had this pamphlet with a bunch of breathing exercises, and they went through it with us. But I definitely was aware because they would send out an SMS every week, what’s on this week, so I was definitely aware.”

In the Bachelor of Commerce Management cohort, Maxine was the class representative. She was aware of most of the institution’s policies as she, from time to time, communicated them to students. She pointed out how grateful she was. She stated:

“So, I was Class Representative. So thankfully, yes, I was aware of all of them.”

Hannah was asked about the available academic support structures at the Higher Education institution where she was enrolled and she mentioned the writing workshop. This workshop assists students in enhancing their writing skills and provides assistance with referencing. This is supported by her statement:

“I knew about the writing workshop specifically for research students.”

The participants were asked if they made use of the academic support provided by the institution. Five of the participants explained how they interacted with the Programme Manager in the Academic department who assisted them and provided them with academic support. This is echoed by the following assertion by Thabo:

“Well, I had spoken with the academic team because I have a previous relationship with the Programme Manager because she was my lecturer from marketing first year.”

Tezlyn had a positive review of the academic department. She said that:

“I think that our Head of Department was also really helpful. We basically had everything we needed as an honours student, so that also made everything quite enjoyable.”

Maxine also had a positive review of the academic department. She explained how she had engaged with a lecturer from the writing centre who assisted her. She affirmed her positive experience with the academic team with the following statements:

“The Programme Manager did brainstorming sessions out of class time. Those helped so much because it was literally two hours that was set aside for you to sit and work and I got so much work done in those times. I chatted to the Programme Manager a lot. I had lots of meetings with her. So I think we had a lot of support from our lecturers.”

Liam found the academic department to be helpful, especially with assessments. He said that:

“I think it was very good because all of the lecturers ensured that they always made sure that they provided us with necessary worksheets, printouts of worksheets, and updated module manuals. So that really helped with studying and doing assignments.”

Similarly, Esther explained how helpful the lecturers were. She stated:

“We had a lot of exam preparation and for the research, the lecturer would help us to set out what needs to be where and how it needs to be set up.”

It is clear from the above statements that the participants were cognisant of the various types of academic support provided by the higher education institution. This points to the institution’s efforts to ensure that its policies are implemented to assist the students. The institution’s academic support included establishing a writing centre which the students found to be useful, as evidenced by the students’ statements. Additionally, the students stated that they were aware of the support workshops offered to help prepare students prior to assessments which further affirm that the institution has marketed the academic support services available to the students. The academic staff also promoted the option of meeting with students to discuss academic-related issues.

4.5.4. Support That the Institution Can Provide

Studies have found that postgraduate students can be supported when the institution assists during registration and orientation, continuous structured support, and explanations of the requirements of the degree (Evans et al., 2018; McPherson et al., 2017). Thabo’s recommendation about how the institution can provide further support includes:

“So, I think the learning part of it is, if that could be innovative in some sort of way where the students can be made more engaged, or more interested.”

Tezlyn’s recommendations to the institution were two-fold as she saw benefit in the psychoeducation group sessions, and she finds value in assistance with referencing for their assessments. She expressed how beneficial the psychoeducation group sessions were during her postgraduate studies. She explained that it was not a therapy session, instead, it involved the students choosing topics such as general anxiety, exam stress or test anxiety and they would have an open conversation about the selected topic. She found that students could relate to the topics through their similar experiences. This is illustrated in the following excerpt:

“We did this sort of program as part of our honours, it was a psycho education group that we organised as psych honours students. I think, giving students a platform where they can sort of lean on each other and bounce off each other to figure out what we can do to manage stress better would be quite helpful.”

Tezlyn also believes that more awareness of the referencing support available on campus would be helpful to the students. She explained that the institution’s library provides support, but it should be advertised more to students:

“I think there’s a lot already like we have the library and yeah, all these resources. If it’s just a matter of maybe what they could do is just, try and advertise it a little bit more. But there’s referencing guides to do basically everything you need to do as a student. So, I think it’s just a matter of connecting the students to the resources

Maxine is of the opinion that sports are an integral part of coping with stress. She stated:

“For me, personally, sports is a big, way that I handle stress or deal with stress. Obviously, a lot of sport options here at the college. So, I think maybe not pushing sport but recommending to find your sport that you enjoy. I think that would be a good angle to like approach saying, you know, to help stress, this is one of the ways that you can do it. I also don’t know if there’s a dance a dancing committee or I know a lot of people that dance, because one it’s good exercise and two or something like Zumba.”

Chad’s recommendation for institutional assistance included getting to know the academic staff and building relationships with them. He said that:

“Maybe to an extent to get to know your lecturer. If you have more interaction with your program manager and all these different lecturer’s things can be more easier.”

Hannah expressed similar sentiments to Chad as she also believed that it is important to foster and create relationships with lecturers. She said that:

“I think honestly using the lecturers would be more beneficial just because our classes are so small, there is more of a one-on-one kind of relationship between lecturer and student. And I think that students also might feel more comfortable speaking to a familiar face.”

Hence, it can be established that the students were mindful of the current support the institution offered and they expressed their own opinions of additional support that could be offered to future students. To summarise, the participants provided a diverse set of recommendations some of which were academic in nature, such as more awareness of referencing support workshops and establishing a relationship with the academic staff. Additionally, they also provided recommendations that were more social in nature, including promoting the sporting activities available and offering dance classes. The recommendations provided by the students can be valuable for institutions to consider in the future to support other postgraduate students.

4.6. Conclusion

This chapter has endeavoured to provide some insight and information about the experience of postgraduate students at a private Higher Education institution in Durban, KwaZulu-Natal. The findings of this research study highlighted the stressors that the students experienced namely, the transition from undergraduate to postgraduate studies, time management, academic stress, difficulty with the Research module, pressure to perform well, fear of the future, working and studying, personal life issues, financial issues, and living away from family. Furthermore, this chapter provided an in-depth review of the research results which showed the coping strategies that the postgraduate students used, such as support from family and friends, socialising, avoidance, procrastination, working through it, and physical activities. Additional themes such as counselling support, academic support, the experiences of the students, and institutional support were identified from the findings.

5. CHAPTER 5 - FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1. Introduction

This study intended to research the key stressors among postgraduate students at a private Higher Education institution to explore their coping strategies. In addition, I intended to determine why these strategies were useful for them. In this chapter, I highlight the key insights that the study has contributed to the scholarship of stress in learning. I commence this chapter with an outline of the research questions before aligning them with the findings of the study. I present each question together with the findings. This is done to show how each of the research questions was addressed. A summative discussion of this is followed by an argument on the implications of the study. This chapter also presents the recommendations on how the institution can offer alternate ways to assist postgraduate students in coping with stress and suggestions for future research.

5.2. Discussion of Findings

In this research study there were three research questions related to postgraduate students' perception of stress and coping at a private Higher Education institution in KwaZulu-Natal:

1. What are the key stressors among postgraduate students at a private Higher Education institution?
2. How do postgraduate students cope with stress?
3. Why are those particular coping strategies useful to postgraduate students?

Research Question 1: What are the key stressors among postgraduate students at a private higher education institution?

In response to the first research question, eight themes emerged from the interview data: the transition from undergraduate studies to postgraduate studies; time management; academic workload; difficulty with the research module; fear of the future; personal life issues; financial stress; and living away from family.

The theme of transitioning from undergraduate studies to postgraduate studies was critical as all eight of the participants expressed the stress they experienced when transitioning from undergraduate to postgraduate studies (as discussed in Chapter four). The students mentioned that initially, they did not anticipate postgraduate studies to be as stressful as most of them were under the impression that it would be similar to undergraduate studies. However, as the students became more aware of the additional academic requirements for postgraduate studies it became a major contributing factor to them feeling stressed. The participants felt overwhelmed by the level of work required in postgraduate studies. The findings indicating students feeling overwhelmed when they transition from undergraduate to postgraduate studies are in line with the findings of similar research studies (Sanagavarapu & Abraham, 2020).

The findings of the study showed that all eight of the participants also struggled to manage their time effectively. The participants did not manage the due dates of their assessments well as they assumed they could focus on other non-academic related work as well. Kandhal Yazhini et al. (2021) explain that time management involves arranging and organising a schedule so that productive work can be achieved. In some cases, students could not be productive as they underestimated the time it would take to complete certain assignments. They procrastinated and as a result, stressed when the assessments were due. Three of the participants were working whilst studying which also contributed to them struggling to manage their time.

The academic workload of postgraduate studies was one of the major stressors in this study. Six of the participants struggled to cope with the academic workload. They found that the workload in postgraduate studies was different to what they had done in their undergraduate studies. They did not anticipate that they would need to invest time in completing their assignments. Some of the participants often completed their assignments closer to the due date which is why they experienced stress as they had a shorter time-frame to complete the work. They also found that some of the assignments were longer and required more research than they expected.

Students mainly struggle with the research module in their postgraduate studies because they do not understand the requirements of the research process or do not have sufficient support, guidance, and direction from their supervisors. Five of the eight participants found the research module to be difficult. They grappled with the contents of research and did not enjoy the module which caused them to experience stress. Some of the participants cited that the reason they found the research module difficult was that it was the first time they had engaged in a

research process, so it was unfamiliar to them. Additionally, one of the participants indicated that the support from the supervisor was minimal which resulted in the student feeling stressed as they were unsure of how to conduct the research process.

Graduates are often fearful of the future, once they complete their studies as they are unsure of what to expect and what opportunities might be available to them. Some participants were uncertain as to whether they wanted to pursue further studies or start working. Fifty per cent of the participants indicated that they were fearful of the future as they were unsure if they would secure employment. With the employment rate being high in South Africa, students' employment fears are well-founded (Mseleku, 2022). The fear of not being able to find employment is a contributing factor to students feeling stressed.

Postgraduate students often encounter personal life challenges that cause them stress. Personal stress issues are associated with their relationships, family, and social circle. Students also grapple to solidify their identity as they are exposed to various factors and become confused. In this study, the findings showed that participants struggled with life challenges while studying. Some students encountered relationship issues which increased their stress levels. Some of their home lives were also stressful and this coupled with studying elevated the stress they experienced. As mentioned in Chapter four, one of the students struggled with her personal identity as she was afraid to reveal her sexuality due to the fear of being judged and rejected by peers and this added to the stress she experienced.

Financial stress is associated with anxiety around an individual's financial status; expenses, trying to earn an income, and the stress of having to manage their finances. Szkody's (2023) study with postgraduate students showed that students experienced financial stress as they were sometimes unable to afford to pay for their studies and had personal expenses which caused them to feel anxious. Similarly, in this study, the participants indicated that they faced challenges with paying for living expenses. Some of the participants lived away from their families so they incurred additional living expenses. In some cases, students had to work concurrently whilst studying and this also heightened their stress levels.

The last theme that emerged from enquiring about the stressors that the students experienced was the stress associated with students living away from their families. Students who live with their families have direct support while students who live away from their families can experience loneliness and struggle to adjust to being away from their families when they miss home. Loneliness may cause university students to feel stressed and can negatively impact their

academic performance (Phillips et al., 2022). Two of the participants lived away from their families and both participants expressed the loneliness they felt as well as the stress that this caused. They did not have a direct family support structure which further exacerbated the situation. One of the participants said that she missed being able to go home and speak to her mother about her day as she felt that when she did that in high school it comforted her.

Research Question 2: How do postgraduate students cope with stress?

In response to the second research question about how postgraduate students cope with stress, five themes emerged from the interviews conducted with the participants. One of the objectives of this study was to understand the coping strategies of the postgraduate students at a private Higher Education institution in KwaZulu-Natal. The outcome of the study indicated that postgraduate students used various coping strategies during their studies. I found that these postgraduate students enlisted the assistance of their family and friends to help them cope with stress, as this was a common theme among the participants.

I argue that there is value in reliance on the support of family and friends as this was one of the major coping strategies that students used during their studies. The participants strongly argued that they needed to spend time with family and friends when they were taking a break from their studies and this coping strategy greatly assisted them to feel more at ease. They found value in relying on friends and family when they were stressed. The participants said that they would often go out with their friends to socialise so that they could momentarily forget about their stress. Some of the participants claimed that their family also offered support to them, as they engaged in conversations about their studies, and they felt a sense of relief as some of the family members were very supportive and encouraging. Additionally, some of the participant's family members were also studying; during their interactions, the participants could discuss their shared experiences which provided a sense of comfort that they were not going through the stress of students alone.

Social interaction plays a vital role in assisting postgraduate students to cope with stress as students tend to feel less stressed after they have spent time with their peers, friends, or family (Hatunoglu, 2020). I found that all eight research participants socialised to cope with stress. The participants felt a sense of relief when they went out with their friends. While socialising has its benefits, excessive socialising can have negative consequences if there is an abuse of

substances. In this study, I found that some of the students were very self-aware and did not indulge in drinking or smoking excessively as they were mindful that their studies were important.

Similar research studies on students' coping mechanisms have shown that there is a substantial link between procrastination and stress among students (Zhang et al., 2021; Kuftyak, 2022). Procrastination is often a coping mechanism for stress; however, it can also worsen the problem which could lead to poor academic performance. In this study, five of the participants, more than fifty per cent, procrastinated with their assessments. They felt that they would have enough time to complete the assessments but had misjudged the amount of time they needed to complete them. This procrastination resulted in the students feeling stressed.

Drawing from the study done by Ben Salem and Karlin (2023) having a positive mindset, results in lower stress in students. The participants have indicated that when they encountered problems or felt stressed, they would often change their mindset and think positive thoughts which would encourage and inspire them to persevere with their studies. Students who have a positive disposition tend to feel less stressed as indicated by the participants of this study.

I found that four of the participants engaged in physical activities such as playing sports, walking, or going to the gym to alleviate their stress. These participants felt that when they were engaging in physical activity, their minds were more relaxed and not focused on the stress associated with their studies. They felt calmer during the physical activities. A simple task, such as taking a break from studying and going for a walk, helped participants cope with stress. Other participants would often incorporate going to the gym in their routine which they found to be useful to reduce their stress.

Research Question 3: Why are those particular coping strategies useful to postgraduate students?

This research study is vital as the findings will assist postgraduate students to be more self-aware of the stress they are exposed to during their studies. The postgraduate students interviewed in this research project proved to make use of various coping strategies. The main reason that they found these coping strategies useful is because they felt less stressed after using them. All the participants indicated that they used coping strategies to manage or overcome their stress. The coping strategies in this study ranged from relying on the support

of family and friends, socialising, having a positive mindset, and engaging in physical activities. The reasons cited by the participants for why the various coping strategies were useful included improved confidence, positivity, and the sense of relief they felt once they used the coping strategy and it alleviated their stress.

I found that the participants placed great reliance on social support from their peers, friends, and family. Once they had taken some time away from their studies and spent time with those who were dear to them, they often felt relieved. Additionally, thereafter they felt more motivated to do their work and did not feel as stressed or despondent as they had felt prior to meeting their family or friends. I also found that students repetitively engaged in coping strategies they found useful because they felt a sense of relief after engaging in the coping strategy. For example, one participant mentioned that when he experienced stress, he would remember how good it felt previously to go to the gym or spend some time with his friends and then he would repeat the behaviour.

5.3. Reflection on the Framework

In this study, I used Lazarus and Folkman's (1984), Transactional Model of Stress to understand how students coped with the stressors that they encountered. As described in Chapter two, this model applies to the study as it provides a basis for understanding the responses of students when they feel stressed. The Transactional Model of Stress considers the relationship between the individual and the environment that they find themselves in as well as taking into consideration both internal and external factors (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Students react differently to the stressors they encounter based on their experience of the stressor. According to this model, when an individual considers an event to be stressful the primary cognitive appraisal is triggered by their perception of the level of threat to their well-being. The Transactional Model of Stress focuses on the intensity of stress and a person's reaction to the situation. An individual can then either use problem-focused and/or emotion-focused coping mechanisms to address the stress they experience. I found that the Transactional Model of Stress was relevant to this study as it assisted in providing a framework on how to understand the stressors participants experienced; particularly how stressors affected them and how participants reacted to the stressor.

5.4. Limitations of the Study

The first limitation of the study is that the data was generated by interviewing students attending one private Higher Education institution, in one province in South Africa, and this limits the generalisability of the findings. The aim of the study is not to generalise the findings but rather to highlight the key components which can thereafter be used by other postgraduate students as a guide during their studies. The insight and findings from this study may be useful to other postgraduate students despite the findings not being generalisable.

The second limitation is that this is a qualitative study which comprises a small number of participants, and the findings cannot be generalised. Qualitative studies focus on the depth of meaning that can be ascertained from the participants and the focus is not on a large number of participants. In this study, only eight participants were interviewed which comprised a small percentage of the total number of postgraduate students at the institution. Due to this low number of participants, the findings will not be generalisable. However, there is value in the in-depth meaning that was provided by the findings of the research project.

5.5. Recommendations for Further Research

The analysis of the data findings relating to postgraduate students' perception of stress and coping makes room for recommendations for further research. I will provide recommendations for the institution and research.

5.5.1. Recommendations for the Institution

The participants were asked what the institution could do to assist postgraduate students in coping with stress. Below are some of the recommendations from the participants:

- The teaching and learning strategy for postgraduate studies should be more innovative and creative so that students are more engaged and interested in the material, especially for the Research module which most of the students struggled with.
- Student focus groups should be held regularly and initiated by the institution. These group sessions should cover topics such as anxiety, stress, examination stress, and test anxiety. In these sessions, students can share their experiences which might be relatable,

and they can also share ways in which they coped with stress which will benefit their peers. These sessions can be held throughout the learning process as there are different times in the semester when students experience stress.

- There should be more sporting activities made available to the students which may assist them in coping with stress. The current sporting activities should also be advertised more to students. Additionally, dancing classes should be offered to students as well which might help students cope with stress.
- Increased interaction between the students and their lecturers would assist them. One-on-one sessions between lecturers and students should be scheduled to build relationships between the students and academic staff.

5.5.2. Recommendations for Research

The findings of this study and the limitations were taken into consideration in order to provide recommendations. One of the limitations was that the sample size for this qualitative study was rather small and might not be inclusive of other opinions and perceptions. Hence, I propose the following recommendations for further research:

- Future studies should include a larger sample size which will be more representative of the student population as the current study only included a sample size of eight students. Furthermore, the students were selected from only one higher education institution. The recommendation is for studies to be done that encompass other provinces and more than one higher education institution.
- The focus of the study was to explore how students coped with stress. Emerging from this is a recommendation that academic support though orientation be provided to students to enable them to cope better with the stress. A good foundation needs to be set at the beginning of the semester so that students have clear guidelines and expectations of the requirements of the qualification. This study recommends that a staggered approach to orientating postgraduate students be explored so that ample support at the beginning of the semester is provided, especially for students who register after the initial orientation session has been done.
- As stress is a significant factor that affects students during their studies and they have

to use various ways to cope with stress, there is importance in conducting studies of this nature. This study recommends that future research be conducted on resilience, coping, and student adjustment to university as this was a major theme from the findings of this study. The findings of future research will be beneficial to the student population as stress and coping strategies continue to remain relevant.

5.6. Conclusion

This chapter presented a summary of the study and the main findings of the research. I concluded that postgraduate students are exposed to a variety of stressors including the transition from undergraduate to postgraduate studies, time management, academic stress, difficulty with the Research module, pressure to perform well, fear of the future, working and studying, personal life issues, financial issues, and living away from family. The findings of this research study suggest that postgraduate students used coping strategies such as support from family and friends, socialising, avoidance, procrastination, working through it, and physical activities. I also found that the coping strategy that each student used was beneficial to that student and some of the students continued to use that particular coping strategy during their postgraduate studies. This study, therefore contributed to knowledge by highlighting how students experience stress during their postgraduate studies and how the coping strategies assisted in alleviating that stress. The findings of the study were insightful and may be beneficial to other postgraduate students as well as higher educational institutions that can implement support structures to assist students.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1: PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

LETTER TO THE PARTICIPANTS

University of KwaZulu-Natal
Edgewood Campus
Private Bag X03
Ashwood
3605

Dear Sir/Madam

INFORMED CONSENT LETTER

My name is Daylene Reddy and I am a Master's student at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Edgewood Campus in Pinetown. You are kindly invited to participate in my study titled: Perceived sources of stress and coping among postgraduate students at a private Higher Education institution in Kwazulu-Natal: case study. The data of the study will be used for this degree purposes only, your name and other details will be kept confidential.

Kindly note the following:

- Your confidentiality is guaranteed as your inputs will not be attributed to you in person but reported only as a population member opinion.
- The interview may last for about 1 hour and may be split depending on your preference.
- Any information you give cannot be used against you, and the generated data will be used for this research only.

- Data will be stored in secure storage and destroyed after 5 years.
- You have a choice to participate, not participate or stop participating in the research. You will not be penalised for taking such an action.
- The research aims at developing ways in which curriculum can be adapted to cater for the needs of learners living with diverse disabilities in order to be successful in their schooling.
- Your involvement is purely for academic purposes only, and no financial benefits are involved.
- If you are willing to be interviewed, please indicate (by ticking as applicable) whether or not you are willing to allow the interview to be recorded with the following equipment:

	Willing	Not willing
Audio equipment		

Should you wish to contact me, my supervisor, or the UKZN Ethics office, please see the details below:

Researcher	Supervisor	Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Administration
Name: Qualification: MEd (Educational Psychology) Cell: Email:	Name: Dr. Makie Kortjass Qualification: PhD Telephone: 031 260 3669 Email: Kortjassm@ukzn.ac.za	Research Office, Westville Campus Govan Mbeki Building Private Bag X 54001 Durban 4000 KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa Tel: 27 31 2604557- Fax: 27 31 2604609 Email: HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za

Thank you for your contribution to this study.

DECLARATION

I (full names of participant)
hereby confirm that I understand the contents of this document and the nature of the research
project, and I consent to participate in the research project.

I understand that I am free to withdraw from the project at any time if I want to.

.....

SIGNATURE OF PARTICIPANT

DATE

APPENDIX 2: DATA GENERATION INSTRUMENT INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Dear respondent, please provide the information requested below.

Kindly fill in the blank spaces or tick the appropriate box.

1. Initials: _____ Surname: _____ Title: _____

2. Academic Qualification registered for in 2023: _____

Major (if there are any) _____

3. Age in years:

18 – 22	23 - 27	28+	
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4. Gender:

Male	Female	Other	
------	--------	-------	--

5. Race:

Black	White	Indian	Coloured	Other
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In-depth Interviews with students:

1. Tell me about your first semester of your postgraduate studies.
2. What have you enjoyed the most about your postgraduate studies this year?
3. What have been some of the challenges?
4. What is your understanding of stress experienced by students?
5. Have you experienced any stress in the first semester of your postgraduate studies?
6. Explain the level of stress that you experienced.
7. List some of the stressors that you experienced during your studies.
8. Elaborate on these stressors.
9. Which was the primary source of stress?
10. Did you use any coping strategies?
11. Describe the coping strategies that you used.
12. Which was the primary coping strategy that you used?

13. Were the coping strategies beneficial?
14. Were you aware of the counselling options available on campus?
15. Did you make use of the counselling options?
16. Were you aware of the support workshops that were held on campus?
17. Did you attend the support workshops?
18. Were you aware of the academic support offered by the School?
19. Have you reached out to your Programme Manager or the Academic team for support?
20. If so, was this support helpful?
21. Did you enlist the help of the institution during the times that you felt stressed?
22. In your opinion, what other support strategies do you think the institution can use to assist students who are stressed?
23. Are there any other issues about stress and learning as a postgraduate student you would like to mention?

APPENDIX 3: HIGHER EDUCATION PERMISSION LETTER

									
	Reference: R. 15916 [RPG004] Enquiries: research@iie.ac.za								
	18 April 2024								
	Letter of Institutional Consent								
	<table border="1"> <tr> <td>Initials and surname:</td> <td>D Reddy</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Institution Registered at:</td> <td>University of KwaZulu Natal</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Qualification:</td> <td>Master of Education (Educational Psychology)</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Title of study/paper:</td> <td>Perceived sources of stress and coping among postgraduate students at a private Higher Education Institution In KwaZulu-Natal: A case study</td> </tr> </table>	Initials and surname:	D Reddy	Institution Registered at:	University of KwaZulu Natal	Qualification:	Master of Education (Educational Psychology)	Title of study/paper:	Perceived sources of stress and coping among postgraduate students at a private Higher Education Institution In KwaZulu-Natal: A case study
Initials and surname:	D Reddy								
Institution Registered at:	University of KwaZulu Natal								
Qualification:	Master of Education (Educational Psychology)								
Title of study/paper:	Perceived sources of stress and coping among postgraduate students at a private Higher Education Institution In KwaZulu-Natal: A case study								
	Dear Daylene Reddy We are pleased to inform you that the IIE Ethics Committee has reviewed and provided consent to utilise IIE staff, students, or artefacts to complete your research project entitled "Perceived sources of stress and coping among postgraduate students at a private Higher Education Institution in KwaZulu-Natal: A case study". The following conditions are the standard requirements attached to the approval of all applications to conduct research involving human participants: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Approval will be for a period of two (2) years, starting from the date of approval. • You should notify the IIE Ethics Committee regarding any alteration to the approved project. • You should notify the IIE Ethics Committee in the event of any adverse effects on participants or of any unforeseen development that might compromise the ethical integrity of your research project. • The researcher(s) will need to obtain informed consent in writing from the participants/ respondents in their sample if the study is not anonymous. • A copy of this letter must be forwarded to the relevant person(s) at the campus/es that would be involved in this research study. • Research must be conducted in such a way that the normal programme and operations of the campus / office is not interrupted. • A report and a copy of any published outputs should be submitted to the IIE Ethics Committee upon the completion of the project. • You are required to uphold the IIE's Ethics stance as described in the Research and Postgraduate Studies Policy (IIE007). The policy is available on the institutional website. 								
	on behalf of The IIE Ethics Committee  Dr WH Engelbrecht Dean: Research and Postgraduate Studies The Independent Institute of Education								
	ADTECH House, Inanda Greens, 54 Wards Rd West, Wards Valley 2196 P.O. Box 2369, Randburg 2126 Directors: GD Whyte (UK), JDR Oosth, MD Atken, SCO Lurie Group Company Secretary: CB Cruise								
									
The Independent Institute of Education (Pty) Ltd is registered with the Department of Higher Education and Training as a private education institution under the Higher Education Act, 1997 (reg. no. 2007HE070002). Company registration number: 1987300475407.									

APPENDIX 4: TURNITIN REPORT

Turnitin Originality Report

Processed on: 09-Oct-2024 5:43 PM CAT
 ID: 2480179779
 Word Count: 42330
 Submitted: 1

Thesis By Daylene Reddy

Similarity Index	Similarity by Source
17%	Internet Sources: 13%
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1% match () Mkhabela, Duduzile Elizabeth. "Leisure reading experiences : the case study of young adult- readers at the University of Mpumalanga". 2022
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< 1% match () Mhlongo, Favourite. "The role of pervasive skills in the academic and professional preparation of Accounting students in the University of KwaZulu-Natal.Ishaza lokwandiseka lowamakhono emfundo eobakeme kanve nokulungiselelwa ngobungcweti kwabafundi abafunda isifundo esibhekene nezizimali eNyuvesi yakwaZulu-Natal.". 2022
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< 1% match (Internet from 21-Oct-2022) https://researchspace.ukzn.ac.za/bitstream/handle/10413/20985/Khuzwayo_Nomthandazo_Immaculate_2021.pdf?isAllowed=y&sequence=1

APPENDIX 5: ETHICAL CLEARANCE CERTIFICATE



22 March 2024

Daylene Reddy (206509348)
School of Education
Edgewood Campus

Dear D Reddy,

Protocol reference number: HSSREC/00006398/2024

Project title: Perceived sources of stress and coping among postgraduate students at a private higher education institution in KwaZulu-Natal: A case study

Degree: Masters

Approval Notification – Expedited Application

This letter serves to notify you that your application received on 08 January 2024 in connection with the above, was reviewed by the Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (HSSREC) and the protocol has been granted FULL APPROVAL. Please take note of the following condition:

Condition: Data collection can only commence once gatekeeper permission has been submitted to and considered by HSSREC.

Any alteration/s to the approved research protocol i.e. Questionnaire/Interview Schedule, Informed Consent Form, Title of the Project, Location of the Study, Research Approach and Methods must be reviewed and approved through the amendment/modification prior to its implementation. In case you have further queries, please quote the above reference number.

PLEASE NOTE: Research data should be securely stored in the discipline/department for a period of 5 years.

Incidents of adverse events and serious adverse events (AEs and SAEs) should be reported in writing to HSSREC, the study sponsors, and any regulatory authority (where appropriate), within 7 working days of the occurrence for local sites and 14 days for all other South African sites.

This approval is valid until 22 March 2025.

To ensure uninterrupted approval of this study beyond the approval expiry date, a progress report must be submitted to the Research Office on the appropriate form 2 - 3 months before the expiry date. A close-out report to be submitted when study is finished.

HSSREC is registered with the South African National Health Research Ethics Council (REC-040414-040).

Yours sincerely,



Professor Dipane Hlalele (Chair)/dd
Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee

Postal Address: Private Bag 254001, Durban, 4000, South Africa

Telephone: +27 (0)31 260 8350/4557/3587 Email: hssrec@ukzn.ac.za Website: <http://research.ukzn.ac.za/Research-Ethics>

Partnering Campuses: Edgewood Howard College Medical School Pietermaritzburg Washville

INSPIRING GREATNESS

APPENDIX 6: LANGUAGE EDITING CERTIFICATE

Christine Davis

[REDACTED]

Tel: [REDACTED]

Email: [REDACTED]

Daylene Reddy

Student No. 206509348

University of KwaZulu-Natal

Durban

South Africa

17 October 2024

To whom it may concern

Re: Thesis: Perceived sources of stress and coping among postgraduate students at a private Higher Education institution in KwaZulu-Natal: A case study.

This letter serves to confirm that I edited Daylene Reddy's (Student No. 206509348) thesis before submission.

Changes were limited to spelling and grammar, while content changes were identified and submitted to Ms. Reddy for review.

TITLE	Perceived sources of stress and coping among postgraduate students at a private Higher Education institution in KwaZulu-Natal: A case study
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Please feel free to contact me should you have any further questions.

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