



Stress, Coping, and Shopping: Exploring Behavioural Responses

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Authors' contributions

This work was carried out in collaboration between both authors. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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ABSTRACT

Stress is an inherent part of human experience, arising from different sources such as environmental pressures, academic challenges, and personal life events etc. It manifests as a physiological response to perceived threats, impacting individual's daily lives and necessitating adaptive adjustments. Coping with stress is essential for an individual in maintaining mental and physical well-being. Coping strategies vary among individuals; one intriguing coping mechanism that has garnered attention is "Retail therapy". This study explores how shopping serves as a coping strategy and sheds some light on its role in stress management by female PG students of GBPUAT, Pantnagar as well as its impact on mental and emotional well-being. This study uses the Cohen's Perceived Stress Scale, Carver's Brief COPE Scale and for assessing shopping behavior, questions derived from Martinez-Lopez's study in 2016. Correlation is the main data analysis technique used in this research. The results revealed that coping strategies play a key role in stress management, while stress levels are inversely related to shopping behavior.

Keywords: *Stress; coping; shopping behavior; stress management; well being.*

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1. INTRODUCTION

Stress can be defined as a state of worry or mental tension caused by a difficult situation or perceived as overwhelming and beyond their coping abilities. However, the way of perceiving stress makes a huge difference in our overall wellbeing [1,2].

Pariat et al. [3] highlighted academic, social, emotional, and financial stress as major categories. Studies by Soomro [4,5,6] categorized stress factors into environmental, academic, and personal factors. Chronic stress can increase the risk of premature mortality and contribute to conditions such as musculoskeletal disorders, high blood pressure, metabolic disturbances, and cardiovascular problems [7] as well as impact on mental health, sleep quality and substance use [8].

Coping strategies play a crucial role in influencing an individual's experience of stress. College students, in particular, face significant challenges [9] in managing stress, but developing effective coping mechanisms can help them navigate social and academic pressures leading to a better college experience [10]. People manage distress in various ways including rumination, overeating, alcohol consumption, and even unplanned purchases [11].

"Retail therapy" is the consumption of goods to compensate for perceived psychosocial deficiencies like low self-esteem and loss of control thus help in alleviating the mood [12,13].

In a survey conducted by Forbes, which spanned 23 countries and over 114,000 adults, found that nearly 80% respondents made at least one splurge purchase to lift their mood in the past month despite only 42% saying they could afford to make such indulgent purchases. However, these coping mechanisms can have both positive and negative impacts on individuals' mental and emotional well-being [10].

Stress can lead to problematic engagement in short-term rewarding behavior like excessive shopping. Consumers under stress strategically allocate resources, leading to increased saving or spending on perceived necessities for control. This behavior can be seen as a coping mechanism to regain a sense of control in stressful situations. Understanding the relationship between stress and its impact on consumer behavior can help in assessing

whether it leads to beneficial or impulsive choices [14].

In a study on the practice of diversion buying as a coping mechanism for stress release by Hama [15], it was found that certain amount of expenditure was required to release the stress. However, spending high expenditure rate on diversion buying didn't relieve stress.

In context of COVID 19 pandemic, it was found that stress significantly affected online shopping behavior among college students during the pandemic. Further, this research also revealed that female students tend to display greater online shopping behavior and use shopping for coping with stress when compared to male students [16].

In a nutshell, several factors result in stress, despite this study aims to understand the shopping as a coping mechanism in management of stress.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

A survey was carried out among female post graduate students of G. B. Pant University of Agriculture and Technology Pantnagar to determine the stress level among them and the coping strategies being used by the respondents. In addition, how shopping as a coping strategy specifically helps in relieving stress was determined. A sample size of 185 was determined using Slovin's formula from the population of 340 female PG students of the university.

Perceived Stress Scale (PSS) [17], widely recognized tool for providing a quantitative measure of stress perception was utilized to evaluate the respondents perceived stress levels. It categorizes the stress score into three levels viz. low stress (LS), medium stress (MS) and high stress (HS).

Additionally, the survey aimed to explore the coping strategies adopted by participants in response to stressors. To assess coping strategies comprehensively, the Brief COPE Scale [18] was utilized. The scale covers 14 different coping strategies that were merged into three types based on the way the respondents tackle the stressors viz. Problem-Focused Coping, Emotion-Focused Coping and Avoidant Coping.

The problem-focused coping focuses on directly addressing the stressor and finding solutions to

mitigate or resolve. It included the strategies like active coping, positive reframing, planning and use of instrumental support. The emotion-focused coping involves managing the emotional response to the stressor rather than changing the stressor itself. People using emotion-focused coping may seek emotional support from others, use humor or positive reinterpretation to find meaning in the situation, turn to religious or spiritual beliefs for comfort or accepting the reality and venting. Avoidant coping involves avoiding or ignoring the stressor rather than directly addressing them. People using avoidant coping may engage in activities like distracting themselves, denying the existence of the stressor, giving up efforts to deal with it or using substances to escape from the stress temporarily.

The shopping in itself is a part of avoidant type of coping mechanism. The questions were prepared to determine how shopping affects in dealing with the stressful conditions on the basis of the parameters like mood modification, escape, intrinsic enjoyment and sensation seeking. The questions were adapted from the study done by Martinez-Lopez [19].

Shopping behavior can affect mood modification by providing a temporary boost in mood through the fulfillment of desires and the sense of accomplishment from finding and purchasing desired items. It can also serve as an escape from everyday stressors and negative emotions by offering a distraction and fantasy fulfillment that temporarily shifts attention away from stressful situations. Additionally, shopping can bring intrinsic enjoyment through the pleasure of exploring new products and experiences viz. trying on new clothes and indulging in treats or luxury items. For sensation seekers, shopping offers novelty, variety and excitement through the discovery of unique and stimulating products, activating reward pathways and providing a sense of thrill and satisfaction. Therefore, all these aspects directly or indirectly help an individual in relieving the stress.

For the data collection purpose, a Google Form was developed and circulated among the respondents. For the statistical analysis of the data collected, a descriptive statistical measure, correlation was employed.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Sample Characteristics

A survey was conducted among 185 female postgraduate students, consisting of 96 Master's

and 89 Doctorate students. Among them, the majority (96) were in the age group of 24 to 26 years, followed by 58 respondents aged 20 to 23 years, 26 from the age group of 27 to 29 years, and 5 in the age group over 30 years.

Regarding marital status, most respondents were unmarried (170), while a small number were married (12) and engaged (3). In terms of financial support, the primary sources were money from parents, followed by scholarships, contributions from husbands and income from part-time jobs.

3.2 Overall Stress

The Perceived Stress Scale (PSS) was used to determine the stress levels of the respondents. The stress scores were categorized into three levels: low stress (LS), medium stress (MS) and high stress (HS). The results revealed that 6.5% of respondents fell into the LS category, 78.4% into the MS category and 15.1% into the HS category. This indicates that the majority of respondents were experiencing medium level of stress, followed by a significant proportion dealing with high stress, while only a few were experiencing low stress. The stress among postgraduate female students residing in hostels can be attributed to academic pressure, social isolation and adjustment challenges in a new environment. Additionally, managing time between studies and personal life often adds to their stress levels.

3.3 Coping Strategies

The Brief COPE Scale was used to determine the trend in coping strategies. The three broad categories of coping strategies were problem-focused coping, emotion-focused coping and avoidant coping. The descriptive analysis revealed the mean scores of the respective categories of coping strategies i.e. Problem-Focused Coping (2.9), Emotion-Focused Coping (2.4), and Avoidant Coping (1.9). The mean score analysis indicate that Problem-Focused Coping was the most frequently employed strategy, suggesting participants preferred addressing stressors directly through practical actions and problem-solving. Emotion-Focused Coping was the second most used, reflecting efforts to manage emotional responses to stress. Avoidant Coping was the least utilized, indicating a lower tendency to evade stressors or associated emotions.

The study assessed the coping strategies being used by respondents and were arranged as per the rank according to the mean score as rated by respondents (Table 1). Active Coping had the highest mean score (Table 1), indicating it is the most frequently used strategy, reflecting a preference for direct action to mitigate stress. Acceptance was the second most used strategy (Table 1), which involves recognizing and accepting the reality of a stressful situation, promoting better psychological adjustment. Planning and Positive Reframing (Table 1) were also commonly employed, highlighting the use of cognitive strategies to handle stressors and reinterpret stressful events positively.

Religion and Self Distraction (Table 1) were moderately used, with religion potentially providing comfort through personal beliefs and self-distraction offering temporary relief without addressing root causes. While, Emotional Support and Use of Instrumental Support (Table 1) were less frequently utilized, suggesting that while social support is valued, it is not always actively sought due to various personal and social factors.

Venting and Self Blame (Table 1) were less common, with venting providing temporary relief but not long-term solutions and self-blame often being maladaptive. Denial and Behavioral Disengagement (Table 1) were among the least used strategies, typically being ineffective and potentially leading to prolonged stress. Humor was infrequently used, despite its potential benefits for alleviating stress and improving mood. Substance Use had the lowest mean score (Table 1), indicating it is the least used coping strategy, which is positive given its

negative health implications and maladaptive nature.

3.3.1 Shopping behavior and stress

The correlation analysis between various shopping behaviors and stress scores provides insightful results on how shopping as a coping strategy affects stress levels. Specifically, the correlation coefficient for mood modification was -0.1679 (Table 2), indicating that engaging in shopping to modify mood is associated with lower stress levels. This statistically significant finding suggests that using shopping to boost mood can have a small but positive impact on reducing stress. One of the motives behind shopping is to get a relaxed feeling that relieves tension [20,21]. Shopping can also be referred to as self-gratification behavior [22]. Individuals feel that by shopping, they reward themselves for the tough moments in life that they have passed or are currently experiencing.

Similarly, the correlation coefficient for escape was -0.1509 (Table 2), showing that using shopping as a means of escape is linked to marginally lower stress levels. Shopping behavior is carried out to release the tension and stress felt by students¹⁴. Furthermore, one of the reasons for shopping behavior is to suppress the negative emotions felt by individuals related to the problems they are facing. This significant relationship implies that individuals who use shopping to temporarily distance themselves from stressors might experience a significant reduction in stress. Moreover, many previous studies have confirmed that shopping behavior contributes in reducing perceived stress [15,21].

Table 1. Rank of coping strategies according to mean score as rated by respondents

S. No.	Coping strategy	Rank	Mean
1	Active coping	1	3.1
2	Acceptance	2	3.0
3	Planning	3	3.0
4	Positive Reframing	4	2.9
5	Religion	5	2.9
6	Self Distraction	6	2.7
7	Emotional Support	7	2.6
8	Use of Instrumental support	8	2.5
9	Venting	9	2.4
10	Self Blame	10	2.1
11	Denial	11	2.0
12	Behavioral Disengagement	12	2.0
13	Humor	13	1.8
14	Substance use	14	1.1

Table 2. Correlation between Shopping behavior and Stress score

Shopping behavior	Correlation coefficient between shopping behavior and stress score	p-value
Mood modification	-0.1679091724	.02
Escape	-0.1509407056	.04
Intrinsic enjoyment	-0.2267356125	.001
Sensation seeking	-0.1993702259	.006

The analysis also found a negative correlation for intrinsic enjoyment, with a coefficient of -0.2267 (Table 2). This indicates that shopping for intrinsic enjoyment is significantly associated with lower stress levels. The enjoyment and pleasure derived from shopping can act as a significant stress reliever, providing a mental break and positive emotional experience that helps reduce overall stress. The findings of Seo and Green [23] reported that browsing the internet, opening the web browser, and watching shopping objects in sites, individuals already feel happy that can release tension.

Additionally, the correlation coefficient for sensation seeking was -0.1994 (Table 2), suggesting that shopping for sensation-seeking purposes is associated with lower stress levels. This statistically significant relationship indicates that the excitement and thrill of shopping can effectively alleviate stress, offering an engaging distraction from daily stressors.

Overall, the findings reveal that shopping behaviors, particularly those involving mood modification, escape, intrinsic enjoyment and sensation seeking are inversely related to stress levels. Engaging in shopping as a coping strategy can have a beneficial effect on reducing stress. Feelings of joy are one of the biggest reasons individuals engage in online shopping behavior [24]. This feeling of joy due to shopping can be obtained when individuals escape, relax or feeling stress free when shopping online [19].

The statistically significant negative correlations demonstrate that shopping can serve as an effective means of stress management by providing emotional relief and enjoyable experiences. Therefore, incorporating shopping as part of a broader set of coping strategies might help individuals manage their stress levels more effectively [25].

4. CONCLUSION

The analysis highlighted that stress became a significant part of students' lives, with the

majority experiencing medium to high levels of stress due to academic pressures, social isolation, and adjustment challenges. Coping strategies play a crucial role in managing stress, with problem-focused coping being the most frequently employed strategy, followed by emotion-focused coping and avoidant coping.

The results underline the significance of understanding how various coping strategies, including retail therapy, impact mental and emotional well-being. While shopping can offer immediate stress relief, it is important to consider its long-term implications and potential for developing into maladaptive behavior. Therefore, shopping should be a part of broader set of healthy coping strategies, rather than being relied upon exclusively. Further research could delve into the long-term effects of retail therapy and explore alternative coping mechanisms that might offer sustainable stress management.

DISCLAIMER (ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE)

Author(s) hereby declare that NO generative AI technologies such as Large Language Models (ChatGPT, COPILOT, etc) and text-to-image generators have been used during writing or editing of manuscripts.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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