
An Exploratory Study on the factors that cause stress and their impact on academic success: A cross-sectional qualitative study on postgraduate students using semi-structured interviews

Research Report

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Declaration

I hereby declare that the Research Report submitted for the Bachelor of Arts Honours in Psychology degree to The Independent Institute of Education is my own work and has not previously been submitted to another University or Higher Education Institution for degree purposes

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ABSTRACT

The following study seeks to explore the factors that cause postgraduate students stress and how these affect their academic success. In so doing, the study seeks to discover the discrepancies that may exist between the way postgraduate students handle stress when compared to undergraduate students. This is due to the fact that literature found focused on the undergraduate student whereas those on postgraduate studies focused on the practical aspect (nursing) (Jithoo, 2017; Shete & Garkal, 2015).

The study is qualitative in nature implying the use of qualitative methods. Thus, five postgraduate students were selected to partake in the study using non-probability, purposive sampling. Semi-structured interviews were used to give participants time to give a detailed overview of what stress means to them and its impact on their lives. Data acquired from the interviews was analysed using Zhang and Wildemuth's eight step process of qualitative content analysis over a cross-sectional period of time (Maree, 2019). It was found that regardless of past experiences, new experiences made it just as difficult to handle stress. The results suggested that anxiety was a leading cause of stress which resulted in procrastination in terms of focusing on academics, experiencing helplessness (emotionally) and it affected decision-making.

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background

There have been a number of studies conducted on stress and the impact of stress on students however, many are international and pay attention to undergraduate students (Essel & Owusu, 2017; Zondi, 2018; Shankar & Park, 2016; Cachia, Lynam, & Stock, 2018). The researcher found that there were a few done on postgraduate students but even so, most focused on the practical aspect of postgraduate students (nursing, junior medical doctors and medical trainees) (Shete & Garkal, 2015; Yusoff & Rahim, 2010). Previous literature indicates that academic stress often leads to a drop in academic performance, motivation and an increase in the risk of drop-out rates (Essel & Owusu, 2017; Zondi, 2018) however, the researcher was not able to find any information that states that it is same for postgraduate students. So, the researcher aims to find out what factors cause stress in postgraduate students and the impact of the stress not only on their academic success/performance but in their overall lives. In so doing, the researcher aims to discover discrepancies that may exist in the way postgraduate students handle stress when compared to undergraduate students based on prior exposure/past experience.

1.2. Rationale

The study is relevant in that its main focus is the postgraduate student thereby paying attention to the psychology that goes behind mental processes such as decision making and the reasons behind it when students are stressed (Watts, Cockcroft & Duncan, 2013). In so doing, it aims to understand human behaviour and the decisions that lead to some students' behaviours and emotions when faced with challenges. In addition, it seeks to explore the factors that influence these process (reasoning, thoughts and behaviour) and their impact on the academic success of postgraduate students. By understanding the mental and emotional processes that occur, an understanding to the students behaviour will be gained particularly when these students experience stress.

Towards society, the study aims to make the society aware of the problems postgraduate students are faced with and why it is important for the society to

understand the problems postgraduate students come across (Zegeye, Mossie, Gebrie, & Markos, 2018). This is in the sense that some postgraduate students may be suffering and in-need of help but, their families or institutions may not be aware because of the expectations they have for them (focusing on the end result than the process in getting there) (Herath, 2012; Jithoo, 2016). According to Mazumdar, Gogoi, Buragohain and Haloi (2012), the prevalence of stress in postgraduate students is high and the levels of stress vary in intensity. This could be due to a sense of growing pressure to succeed. This in addition to the pressure and stress that comes with entering the work field could explain why some individuals find it difficult to cope with their experiences (Jithoo, 2016).

1.3. Problem Statement

The researcher as a student has experienced and observed stress induced behaviour such as poor academic performance and poor class attendance among others that students exhibit (Zondi, 2019). Since stress has been associated with poor academic performance which inevitably affects academic success (Pillay & Ngcobo, 2010), the researcher aims to explore the factors that cause stress and the impact of these factors on the academic success of postgraduate students due to the fact that previous literature focused on the undergraduate student. In so doing, the researcher aims to discover challenges the postgraduate student faces and how they overcome these challenges based on experience of being a tertiary student. The discrepancies between how problems were solved as undergraduate students and how problems are solved as postgraduate students are of interest to the researcher in that they will allow for the researcher to understand the level of maturity and growth when it comes to not only dealing with these challenges but in how the postgraduate students deal with the challenges faced. As a result, it will help discover if there are any variations in the mental processes that occur and behaviour of students who have experienced similar challenges before or if they continue thinking in the same way.

1.4. Purpose Statement

The following study aims to discover what causes postgraduate students stress and how these students handle the negative stress. In so doing, the discrepancies that may exist in the causes of stress among the postgraduate student collective will

give insight to the researcher in that the researcher aims to find out if the causes are n any different compared to those that cause undergraduate students stress.

This will assist the researcher in uncovering whether prior exposure for postgraduate students has taught them how to better handle negative stress or if the postgraduate students have made changes in growth and maturity.

1.5. Research Question

What factors contribute to stress in postgraduate students and how does it impact on their academic success?

1.6. Objectives

- To describe the factors that cause stress in postgraduate students
- To explain the impact of stress on the students' health and decision-making pertaining school work and dealing with the stress
- To explain the impact of stress on academic performance/success

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Theoretical foundation and how it links to the research problem

Learned helplessness

Learned helplessness takes place as a result of not understanding a way to cope with/ handle a situation (Watts et al., 2013). This is a state in which experiencing random or uncontrolled consequences leads to feelings of helplessness and possibly depression (Cacioppo & Freberg, 2016). It is associated with many negative symptoms including anxiety and worry among others (Abdullah, Shah & Rohaiza, 2020). For this reason, students are acclimatised to experiencing distress, and/or discomfort without a way of escaping it (Watts et al., 2013). When this occurs, it results in helplessness.

With regards to the study, learned helplessness could somewhat be referred to as a 'habit' particularly when students are accustomed to being stressed. This could occur as a result of experiencing stress which often affects the way students think and/or behave when stressed (they feel as though they have no control over the situation therefore, they do not try to solve it) (Watts et al., 2013). As such, it is worth noting that the psyche, as the primary source of human behaviour proclaims that our feelings, motivations and decisions are practically influenced by our past experiences, and stored within the unconscious (Freud, 1915; Watts et al., 2013).

So, when students are stressed during a test or an exam, they might not perform well due to the anxiety they experience which results in being demotivated and uninspired (Gomes, Faria, & Lopes, 2016; Jithoo, 2016). When this happens, students may feel inclined to put work off for later or putting less effort in their work because they do not believe they will perform better or succeed. This lax behaviour therefore leads students to sink into depression due to the pressure they feel when deadlines approach since work was put off for later (Abdullah, Shah, & Rohaiza, 2020). The learned helplessness theory therefore plays a vital role in that it explains what happens when students feel that they are helpless and how this helplessness affects their mental health, their studies and their overall health (physical and spiritual health among others).

Lazarus' stress model

According to Lazarus (1966), the effects that stress has on a person is based more on that person's feelings of threat, vulnerability and ability to cope than on the stressful event itself (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Lazarus (1966) states that "psychological stress involves a particular relationship between the person and environment that is appraised by the person as strenuous or exceeding his or her resources thereby endangering his/her well-being" (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). As a result, the effects of stress on an individual can only be determined by how that individual views it.

Primary Appraisal happens when people decide whether a situation is threatening or positive, relevant or irrelevant to their situation (Kail, Cavanaugh & Muller, 2019). There are three things that Lazarus (1966) states need to be evaluated: 1. Is the threat significant to that person, 2. Is it a positive encounter and last but not least, 3. Is it threatening/harmful/challenging (Kail et al., 2019). If an individual decides that the situation is threatening, anger, disappointment, anxiety, worry and last but not least, a fear response in terms of a challenge or anticipation may result (Kail et al., 2019). Therefore, the study's focus is on the behaviours that result when students feel 'threatened' by the challenges they encounter. As such, Lazarus' stress model particularly primary appraisal details the process that goes into dealing with these challenges and how whichever decision is taken affects the students particularly their behaviour, which is of interest to the researcher (Lazarus, 1966). Intrinsically, Lazarus' model/theory gives out a detailed map of how stress perceived by the students and what action results from the influence that the perceived stress has on the students.

2.2. Review of previous literature

Tertiary education is generally a “life-changing, positive experience for university students however, it also presents challenges of its own” (Foxcroft & Roodt, 2018, p. 212). Transitioning to tertiary institutions is often stressful for students as they go through the process of adapting to a new environment (Zondi, 2018) particularly for undergraduate students. This is in the sense that the new environment in itself, can be a source of stress, it influences students’ lives in more ways than one, including: their behaviour, cognition, their emotions and attention to mention but a few (Shankar & Park, 2016; Essel & Owusu, 2017).

When these are affected, students are unable to concentrate, and stay focused. When students are not focused, it results in negligence not only when it comes to school work, but other aspects of their lives, including their physical and psychological health (Gomes, Faria, & Lopes, 2016). The researcher assumes that the lack of evidence for postgraduate students, is due to the presumption that postgraduate students have prior exposure to the environment during undergraduate studies therefore, they should not be as affected.

Stress is defined as the physiological and emotional reactions to challenges that results from the perceptions of danger or threat (Cacioppo and Freberg, 2016). It is the state that results from the “interaction of the individual and the environment that is perceived as threatening to the well-being of that individual” (Shete & Garkal, 2015, p. 119). Zondi (2018) states that the stress stems from circumstances of life and the environment of which includes a number of factors that not only affect their health but their academic performance/success also. As such, the following study aims to explore these factors and the impact of these factors based on previous literature.

Firstly, there are environmental factors, environmental factors are the external conditions that affect and influence the life and development of individuals (Watts et al., 2013). They play a role in the lives of students in that they determine how the lives of students are going to be moving forward. This is in the sense that the environment prepares the students of life outside of home, it informs students of

how the real world operates (Jithoo, 2017). As Kail et al (2019, p.17) states, “human development is inseparable from the environmental contexts in which a person develops” thus, the environmental setting people find themselves in is important. Shankar and Park (2016) state, the environment can be a source of stress, it influences the lives of students in more ways than one. As such, it is important that influence the environment has on the lives of students is accounted for as the students become the product of their environment.

Academically, the environment is one of the factors that affect the efficiency of learning (Essel & Owusu, 2017). This is to say, the condition in which learning takes place needs to be considered for the reason that something that may seem insignificant such as the room temperature, paint used on the walls, the equipment and the school supplies among others determines whether or not students are able to learn effectively. This is in the sense that something insignificant such as the temperature can make it difficult for students to concentrate if they feel too hot or too cold and the paint used on the walls can influence the mood of students (Wheeler, 2018). This is due to the fact that colours have an effect on the mood and behaviour of students (Kurt & Osueke, 2014).

Bright colours such as yellow are associated with warmth and happiness and they are considered energising while dark colours are associated with sadness, depression and fear among others (Kurt & Osueke, 2014). So, it is imperative to take note of the colour of the walls and the impact they may have on the emotions of the students for the reason that if their emotions are affected, students begin to think and act differently. When this happens, they come across as inattentive because of the thoughts going through their minds and when asked questions, feelings of frustrations, hostility and anxiety are likely to develop since they are not focused (Essel & Owusu, 2017).

Accommodation can also be a source of stress in that some students stay alone. When alone, they do not have the human interaction that is integral for human development of which could result in sadness or improper functioning (Watts et al., 2013). This happens to students acclimatised to having people around (school and perhaps work, for those with part-time jobs) and when they return home, they realise

the impact of being alone. This often happens when they are conditioned to spending most of their time surrounded by people and when they get back, they get back to an apartment that is empty and lonely which may result in disappointment (Watts et al., 2013). When this happens, some students may feel homesick because of the discomfort they feel about being alone whereas others manage (Essel & Owusu, 2017). As such, it is imperative to note that people can easily be affected by the type of environment they stay in and study in and how it could lead people to engaging in behaviours that may be considered inappropriate or dangerous. This in the sense that they seek some form of human interaction (Allen, Balfour, Bell, & Marmot, 2014). in places that are not safe of which could lead to poor lifestyle choices and affect concentration and plans they have for their studies and their future.

Lifestyle choices generally have an impact on health so, it is not a wonder that poor lifestyle choices are linked to stress (Zondi, 2018). It has been associated with sleep disturbances and physical symptoms such as headaches and pain and for individuals older than eighteen, substance abuse (Peer, Hillman, & Van Hoet, 2015). This happens as a result of frequently experiencing stress and seeking ways of relieving that tension. When this happens, individuals who are not able to talk about their problems tend to drink to relieve tension (Peer et al., 2015).

Essel & Owusu (2017) believe that stress affects students psychically in that it causes restlessness of which could lead to disturbances in sleep patterns. When restless, students are not able to concentrate and unable to stay motivated of which also affects productivity (Essel & Owusu, 2017). When this happens, students are not able to put in their best effort and their work is not up to standard since their objective is to complete the work. In simple terms, lack of sleep results in fatigue and when people are tired, they often do not want to do work so when pressured to do work, it often results in them doing work that is not up to standard.

Adolescent research by Jacka et al (2010), reported that poor lifestyle choices cause stress in young people mainly because they consume junk food, do not exercise and do not receive enough sleep (Zondi, 2018). This is in the sense that lifestyle choices do not only have an effect on the physical body, but on emotions

and psychological health (it is generally recognised that ill health has an effect on the physical health of people) (Gomes et al., 2016). Hence Cheung et al., (2016) states that students with poor health are more stressed when compared to those who are healthy thus students with poor health do not perform well when compared to those that are healthy.

Another factor that causes stress comes in the form of academic stress, as defined by Zondi (2018), “academic stress is the inability to cope with challenges experienced in tertiary education”. It typically includes examinations and time management among others that contribute to increased levels of anxiety and depression (Jithoo, 2017). This factor gives an explanation to how when students are stressed and unable to meet deadlines, they often feel pressure, tension and anxiety to mention but a few (Essel & Owusu, 2017). When experiencing internal conflict on what to do, students are forced to endure as there are a number of factors that do not allow for them to leave school (fees, pressure from home, academic pressure etcetera).

Academic pressure comes in the form of fear of failure to meet the expectations of friends and family, professors and last but not least, the unrealistic expectations students may have for themselves (Jithoo, 2017). Students are subjected to various stressors due to the fact that they “struggle to fulfil the hopes and expectations their parents and their professors have set for them” (Herath, 2012). When unable to comprehend the challenges encountered, it makes it easy for students to feel stressed of which could result in depression. This is due to the fact that emotionally, chronic stress can lead to mood disorders such as depression and anxiety among others particularly if the mood persists (Shankar & Park, 2016; Barlow, Durand, Du Plessis & Visser, 2017). This may happen if students feel that it is inappropriate to trouble family for the reason that it may come across as ‘not being serious’. As a result, students refuse to come across as vulnerable, they refuse to acknowledge that they are struggling and that they need help because of the fear of not having their lives under control. When this happens, students find themselves in situations that are unbearable and as a result, engage in risky behaviour such as drinking or smoking to decrease the tension and anxiety they feel (Essel & Owusu, 2017). This could lead to addiction if students engage in the behaviour whenever they feel they

are stressed and in-need of 'release' from the tension experienced (Barlow et al., 2017).

Another factor that affects students comes in the form of academic procrastination, the inability to complete a task due to intentionally putting it off for later (Essel & Owusu, 2017). Procrastination affects student academic performance and inevitably academic success in that students who procrastinate/ fail to self-regulate, often feel pressure, anxiety and worry about the amount of work that is required of them (Rabin, Fogel & Nutter-Upham, 2011). This happens when students delay doing their work and only attempt to do it when the due date approaches. This not only gives them less time to complete their work, but also results in compromised performance and progress for the reason that they submit work that is lacking and does not meet the required standard (Rabin et al., 2011; Essel & Owusu, 2017).

Moreover, procrastination has been associated with a decrease in low self-esteem and low academic self-esteem (Essel & Owusu, 2017). This happens when students lack self-discipline. They become disorganised, lack emotional control, have poor impulses and they lack time management among others that result in poor planning and affects students' self-efficacy (Rabin et al., 2011; Essel & Owusu, 2017). When this happens, students find themselves in situations that are not only difficult to control, but results in the stress affecting their quality of life (Rabin et al., 2011).

Last but not least, stress can be caused by personal factors. Personal factors are the individual factors that affect a person's motivation, sense of control, behaviour and perceptions among others (Sternberg & Sternberg, 2017). They exist in every situation even in terms of psychological factors in the sense that they influence decision making based on past experiences, life, personality and education among others (Gifford, & Nilsson, 2014). This in essence affects their moods, emotions, behaviour to mention but a few when students experience pressure, anxiety and feel overwhelmed (Watts et al., 2013).

As such, it is imperative to note that when stressed, students have the ability to choose whether to accept their situation and move on from it or dwell on their

circumstances based on their cognitive bias (Oladipo, 2012). This is in the sense that personal factors affect many aspects of the lives of students and when considering challenges faced, the mental state of students needs to be considered for the reason that they influence the individual cognitive processes that go into decision making (Gifford et al., 2014). Therefore, where the personal factors of students are concerned, psychological factors also need to be looked into for the reason that the effects can be understood through psychological understanding. For instance, do postgraduate students find it difficult to make decisions when it comes to accepting their life circumstances? There are many processes that go into decision making and all these need to be considered.

Connections and gaps

Many of the studies carried out are international studies and focus on the undergraduate student. Be it a private institution or a public one, the focus is the undergraduate student. The researcher assumes that the introduction to a new environment different from home with individuals from different walks of life and the stress experienced explains the reason behind the focus on the undergraduate student and not the postgraduate student. And in an effort to discover if there are differences in the experience (stress experienced and causes of the stress) of postgraduate students, looked for literature to support the claim. Information on the postgraduate student was found and even so, the literature was based on the practical aspect of postgraduate students of which in itself is research worthy as students are introduced to a different aspect of their studies. However, there is little information on postgraduate students who are in between (completed their undergraduate studies but are yet to be introduced to the practical side of their studies and the work field). The researcher is interested in what happens in between for the reason that there is not much information on what happens and the researcher assumes that this is due to the fact that an assumption was made that since postgraduate students have been exposed to the environment for some time, they are better equipped to handle their challenges.

In conclusion, there are a number of factors that cause stress among the student population and as result, they not only affect the mental health of students, but their

physical health and overall other aspects of their lives (Abdullah et al., 2020). If students do not learn to cope with the challenges they come across, or find means to cope with them, it will result in them not only falling behind in their academics but in depression, and anxiety disorders among many others

2.3. Conceptualisation

Concept	Definition
Stress	The physiological and emotional reactions to challenges that results from the perceptions of danger or threat (Cacioppo and Freberg, 2016).
Academic stress	The inability to cope with academic pressure that comes in the form of tests, examinations and the pressure to succeed
Academic success	The ability to perform academically well and inevitably complete the short-term goal of passing, learning skills to become employable (Cachia, Lynam & Stock, 2018).
Cognition	The processes that go into thinking, decision making, perception etcetera (Sternberg & Sternberg, 2017)
Depression	Feelings of hopelessness that result from the inability to stay positive when experiencing pressure or challenges.
Psychological/mental health	“A state of well-being in which the individual realises his/her own abilities, is able to cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully among others” (Lucas & Syrett, 2018). The researcher is interested in postgraduate students’ ability to make concise decisions when facing challenges (the positive and negative effects)
Psychology	The scientific study of the human mind and behaviour used in the study to describe and understand the processes that go into decision making (Watts et al., 2013).

3. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHDOLOGY

3.1. Outline of Paradigm

The Interpretivism approach is preferred on the basis of its application to social issues (du Plooy-Cilliers, Davis, & Bezuidenhout, 2014). This is in the sense that human beings are complex creatures and as such, they can never be completely understood from a single viewpoint – they change over time and the environment where they find themselves continuously influences them (du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014). As a result, the interpretivism approach is considered based on the fact that it takes peoples individual experiences into context and their interpretation of information into account (Maree, 2019). In so doing, it reveals the meanings and values of the people studied as their uniqueness/individuality is valued. The students' interpretation of stress and the factors that cause their stress, their attitudes and their actions towards dealing with the stress to mention but a few represent the distinctions valued. This in essence helps the researcher in understanding the students' perceptions and interpretations of what they are going through and the causes behind their challenges as this is the reality for the students (du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014). It also helps the researcher understand that students come from different walks of life and, as a result, experience challenges differently which would explain why some students would want to 'take a break' from studies, change courses/degrees, completely drop out or engage in risky behaviour to cope with the stress they experience.

3.2. Research approach and design

The following study will make use of qualitative research methods for the reason that qualitative research allows for the issue of quality to be addressed thoroughly by addressing issues of validity, practicality and effectiveness, (Maree, Creswell, Ebersöh, Eloff, Ferreira, Ivankova, Jansen, Nieuwenhuis, Pietersen, Plano Clark, 2016). Since qualitative research is explorative in nature, the study design will use an explorative design to explore factors that cause stress and the impact of the stress on students (du Plooy-Cilliers, Davis & Bezuidenhout, 2014). As such, it will explore, describe, analyse, and interpret the significance of cognitive processes that occur specifically when students make decisions about how to move forward from

the challenges they face (du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014). Because time is limited population wise, the study is cross-sectional. This is to say that the participants will not be available long term as some would be in the work field whereas others may want to further their studies at different tertiary institutions. As such, it will follow an inductive line of reasoning for the reason that it aims to recognise meaningful patterns and connections in the experiences of postgraduate students (Wilson, 2016).

3.3. Population

3.3.1. Target population and accessible population

Target population

In terms of target population, the researcher's interest is the postgraduate student due to prior research focusing on the undergraduate student (Abdullah et al., 2020; Shankar & Park, 2016). That is, the literature the researcher found on stress and its impact on academic success mostly focused on the undergraduate student so for the purpose of this study, the target population is the postgraduate student "the group of individuals or participants with the specific attributes of interest and relevance to the researcher (Bartlett et al., 2001; Creswell, 2003)" (Asiamah, Mensah & Oteng-Abayie, 2017, p.9).

Accessible population

The accessible population of this study consisted of five postgraduate students whom are psychology majors at a Private Institution in Johannesburg. The reason for selecting this population is due to the fact that they were easily accessible to the researcher. These students were selected on the basis that they have a general idea about psychological processes and their effects not only on physical health but on psychological health (Diseth, Pallesen, Brunborg & Larsen, 2010). As such, they have different ideas and interpretations of what stress is to them and what it means to them.

3.3.2. Population parameters (characteristics)

According to the Lavrakas (2008), a population parameter can be defined as any numerical expression that is characteristic of the population in a study that describes the entire population. For the purpose of the following study, the population parameters will include:

- Postgraduate students
- Students who are psychology majors
- Students who are enrolled for the 2020 academic year

3.4. Sampling

Sampling is defined as the process of selecting a smaller group of individuals to represent the larger group (Maree, 2019).

3.4.1. Unit of analysis

The unit of analysis in research can be defined as the smallest element that is being studied (du Plooy-Cilliers et al, 2014). For the purpose of this study, the unit of analysis was made up of postgraduate psychology major students chosen for participation. These students' perceptions, ideas and subjective experiences of challenges encountered were of interest to the researcher hence they are the primary unit of analysis to the researcher.

In terms of sampling, non-probability sampling was used in the study.

3.4.2. Non-probability sampling

It is a procedure in which individuals, objects or events have an unknown possibility of being included in the sample (du Plooy-Cilliers et al, 2014). The researcher used non-probability sampling because not every individual received equal opportunity of being selected, that is, a selected few were allowed to participate in the research (Maree, 2019). Although this is ideal for qualitative research, it makes it difficult to generalise the results to the entire population because its focus is on the interpretation of the phenomenon being observed (stress and its impact on academic success) rather than the statistical value this is but the nature of qualitative research (du Plooy-Cilliers et al, 2014).

3.4.3. Sampling method

Since the researcher aims to understand particular human experiences from the perceptions and perspectives of participants (Maree, 2019), the phenomenology technique will be used. This is in the sense that to understand people and their experience, time is required. The researcher believes that interviews are one of the methods to use as they not only give the participants time to share their experience, but time to understand a certain phenomenon through the experience/eyes of another (du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014).

In terms of sampling method, the study made use of purposive sampling. Maree, Creswell, Ebersöh, Eloff, Ferreira, Ivankova, Jansen, Nieuwenhuis, Pietersen, and Plano Clark (2016) state that “qualitative sampling makes use of purposive sampling for the reason that a sample is chosen with the purpose to represent a phenomenon or group”. This implies that the sample received selection based on the characteristics present for the specific population the researcher is interested in which may come across as bias (Maree, 2019). Moreover, this sampling method was selected on the basis that it saved the researcher time and money in that the sample was easily accessible to the researcher thereby making it easier for the researcher to focus on the interpretations of the students’ experiences.

3.4.4. Sample size

The sample size consisted of five postgraduate students. Since a small number of participants is usually required for qualitative research, its focus is more on the quality of information obtained than on the numerical or statistical value (du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014). In so doing, it gave the researcher a better chance of finding out the challenges each of the students encountered and the reason behind the differences in how these events were/are viewed. The small sample size also meant that each participant had enough time to share their information.

3.5. Data collection

3.5.1. Data collection method

The researcher's aim to understand particular human experiences from the perceptions and perspectives of participants led to the phenomenology technique being used (Maree, 2019). This technique allowed the researcher to understand people and their experiences over a period of time (Khan, 2014). The researcher believes that by using this technique alongside semi-structured interviews, the participants would not only have enough time to share their experiences, but time to understand what is being asked of them (du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014). So, in terms of data collection methods, semi-structured interviews were utilised.

Semi-structured interviews allowed the researcher to ask the participants a series of predetermined questions that allowed for the participants to fully express themselves (Maree, 2019). They encouraged two-way communication and an opportunity for the participants not only to answer questions asked, but to also provide rationale and get clarity on questions they felt needed clarification (Maree, 2019). In this regard, participants had the ability and freedom to freely express themselves because of the environment the researcher created during the interviews.

Therefore, in order to collect data from the participants, the researcher used an interview schedule to host a series of interviews with the five voluntary participants on the online platform zoom. The interviews were audio and video recorded for participants who felt comfortable with the type of recording utilised. During the interviews, the researcher asked questions based on the interview schedule and questions the researcher felt would answer the research question: what are the factors that cause stress and their impact on the postgraduate student's academic success?

The researcher felt that by using semi-structured interviews, participants would feel free when answering questions. The researcher wanted to ensure that participants did not feel obligated to answer questions asked hence the researcher sent out information sheets alongside consent forms to explain what participation

and consenting would entail. Therefore, participants could answer freely and as willingly as they can based on the information/knowledge gained from reading the information sheet. This is because participants have different views and perceptions of what their experiences are and what the impact of these experiences mean to them. So, without coming across as aggressive/ pushy the researcher felt it best to ask questions that would make it easy for the participants to share their subjective experiences regarding the phenomenon in question (what led to the experience/stress, what were the factors associated with stress and last but not least, the impact of the experience on academics and health). The researcher believed that by using semi-structured interviews, the researcher would be able to collect information/data that is diverse (Creswell, 2007; Maree, 2019).

Hence, the researcher felt it best to use semi-structured interviews rather than focus groups because the researcher felt that participants would not be willing to share their experiences with other people (identities would be revealed), it would be expensive particularly with recent events (COVID) and online platforms/technology is being utilised and time would be an issue in that participants may not be available.

3.5.2. Data collection application

The first step involved in collecting data was singling out students studying at a private institution in the Psychology Honours programme (purposive sampling) to take part in the study. The researcher approached several students (5 to be exact) on the social media platform WhatsApp in order to ask them if they would be willing to participate in the study. Although several students got back to the researcher within a matter of minutes, there were two who took time to get back to the researcher. For those that were able to get back to the researcher 'on time', the researcher was able to communicate with them with regards to how participation was to go about. In so doing, participants gave the researcher their email addresses where emails with an information sheet and consent form attached were sent. These were sent to participants who showed interest in partaking in the study. After the participants read through the information sheet, they sent the researcher signed consent forms implying they consented to the interviews. When this was done, the researcher and the participants discussed the time that the interviews would be held. When an agreement was reached, the researcher set up meetings on the online platform zoom where the link was forwarded to participants.

When the interview dates and time approached, the researcher was able to ask the participants which recording they were comfortable with before the interview began and four of the five participants were comfortable with audio recording because some participants felt uncomfortable having been video recorded. Although the audio recording was advantageous in that it makes it easy for the researcher to transcribe the data, the researcher lacked visuals that could assist in noting non-verbal cues participants would have made during those sessions. For the one interview that the researcher managed to video record, there was not much to pick up on as the participant did not show signs of being uncomfortable, agitated or disconcerted.

Although the interviews went well, in the sense that the researcher managed to obtain data from participants, the researcher faced a number of challenges in that the two participants that took time to get back to the researcher made it difficult for the researcher to complete the data collection early. Waiting on participants to get

back to the researcher was time consuming for the researcher in that the researcher felt time was running out. Of the two participants, one took over 12 hours to get back to the researcher while the other took an hour at most to get back to the researcher. When communication was finally achieved, the researcher communicated dates and time for the interviews of which the participants agreed to. When the day of the interviews approached, the researcher had to constantly remind the participants since they had forgotten about the interviews. The researcher thought that it was strange that the participants would forget that they had interviews but the researcher nonetheless continued. Nevertheless, when the time approached for the interview to begin, the participants were late for the interviews.

When this occurred, the researcher had to communicate with the participants via WhatsApp in order to remind them of the interviews and the time they were scheduled for. Only after doing this, were the participants able to take note of the time and join in on the zoom calls. During the zoom calls, the researcher asked questions as they were on the interview schedule with some probing in order to receive clear responses. When this failed, the researcher continued asking for clarity particularly in instances where the participants would answer one part of the question. When the interviews were completed, the researcher saved each audio recording under the participants name (pseudonym) in order not to mix up the interview recordings, these were saved on the researcher's laptop until the researcher began transcribing the data.

3.6. Data analysis

3.6.1. Data analysis method

The data from the interviews was analysed in such a way that it paid extra attention to the responses of the participants. The researcher believed that through content analysis, correlations and patterns would be found in how concepts are communicated. Hence, the researcher listened to the interviews time and time again in order to make sense of the participants experiences and what these experiences meant.

The researcher made use of qualitative content analysis for the reason that it is a method used for the subjective interpretation of the content of data through the process of coding and identifying themes and patterns (du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014). In using this method, the researcher felt that an in-depth understanding of the participant's subjective experiences in the study would provide the researcher with a thick and rich description of the phenomena being observed (participants subjective/lived experiences). Moreover, the researcher felt that it was highly flexible in that it could be conducted at any time and in any location so long as the researcher had access to the sources (the recordings).

One way of doing this would be coding using Zhang and Wildemuth's eight steps in the process of qualitative content analysis.

- The first step was preparing the data: the researcher had to convert all the raw data collected from the interviews (audio/video recordings). To do this, the researcher had to go back and listen to the recordings which were converted to written notes. These written notes had to be properly written before the researcher began with the analysis.
- The second step was defining the coding unit. The research had to find a way to identify/ 'highlight' every statement/phrase considered significant/relevant to the study. To do this, the researcher had to develop the unit of meaning for instance, the frequency of words that appeared in the text and to do this, the researcher had to familiarise herself with the research (Bengtsson, 2016).

- Thirdly, developing categories and coding schemes. The researcher had to group repetitive words or similar words together (words to include) with the intention to form themes. This made it easier for the research to form themes (Bengtsson, 2016).
- The next step is testing coding schemes: once the themes are formed, the researcher had to apply the same process to a different unit to test if the method used is applicable to other samples. This was done to ensure consistency in method used.
- Then coding: substantive coding had to be used in that it allowed the researcher to get “an overall impression and understanding of the text” (du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014, p. 241). In so doing, the researcher was able to group concepts thereby allowing for more data to be compared with new concepts that emerged.
- Assessing coding consistency: consistency is important in any study therefore; it was important to recheck work and make sure that every phrase/sentence highlighted was relevant to the study.
- The conclusion: the researcher had to interpret/categorise what qualified as themes of which assisted in concluding the meaning of the participants experiences (Moustakas, 1994; du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014).
- Last but not least, reporting on methods and findings: the researcher would then interpret the themes/data as truthfully and cautiously as possible.

3.6.2. Data analysis application

During the process of analysing data from the interviews, the researcher found the process of transcribing data difficult and time consuming. Because of this, the researcher looked for other ways to transcribe the data. In so doing, the researcher was able to download a number of transcribing applications including the application 'Transcribe' that managed to transcribe the audio recordings of the interviews into text. Although the applications were effortless in transcribing the audio recordings into text, the researcher found that the transcribing applications were at least 30% inaccurate. This is in the sense that although half of the audio recordings were transcribed, most of the transcripts/ 'texts' lacked order and the statements were mostly incomplete. Therefore, the researcher had to go through the transcriptions while listening to the audio recordings in order to make sure that statements on the transcripts were not only complete but that they made sense also.

In so doing, the researcher managed to obtain complete transcriptions (word documents) of the audio recordings which the researcher then began going through. While going through the transcriptions (the answers/ responses) obtained from the participants, the researcher highlighted words that appeared relevant to the study. In so doing, the researcher discovered that the participants' responses were somewhat similar. This is in the sense that similar words were used and these words were repeated by almost all of the participants. For instance, when giving their personal definition of stress, many mentioned words such as anxiety. In addition, words such as worry and uncertainty among others were mentioned which the researcher grouped and highlighted in yellow to portray anxiety and anything similar to anxiety. So, when the researcher came across the word anxiety which was being repeated in more than one response, the researcher decided to use it as one of the emerging themes.

Moving forward, the researcher found that this coding scheme (identifying and grouping words to include) was applicable to other transcriptions in that it gave the researcher the impression that grouping these concepts together would offer an understanding of the text to the researcher. This did not only help assess

consistency, but it helped provide consistency in that when the work was rechecked, the highlighted words remained consistent/ reliable.

During the conclusion step, the researcher concluded that words such as anxiety or anything relating to anxiety would fall under one theme (emotional response to stress) whereas activities such as exercising, going out to bask in the sun, talking to a friend or family member and watching the Big Bang Theory among others constitute stress relievers (behavioural response to stress). Although these are not all themes discovered during the transcribing process, they constitute some of the themes discovered.

In terms of the last step (reporting on methods and findings), the researcher feels that reporting on the methods used was done in that the researcher found that once transcribing the data was completed, coding was not as demanding or time consuming. This is in the sense that although the researcher was able to go through the transcribed material without hindrance, the researcher experienced some difficulty in grouping words/concepts into themes. In conclusion, the researcher found utilising Zhang and Wildemuth's eight steps in the process of qualitative content analysis undemanding since the demanding part (transcribing the data into text demanding). In terms of reporting on findings, findings are on the following section.

4. FINDINGS AND INTERPRETATION OF FINDINGS

4.1. Presentation and Interpretation of Findings

Theme 1: The Environment

The environment has been problematic for most of the participants due to the COVID pandemic. About 50% of the participants mentioned that since the country went into lockdown, they experienced difficulty in not only maintaining their work ethic, but in terms of focusing on school work (Participant 1, 2020; Participant 2, 2020; participant 3, 2020). This is in the sense that not only did their “learning environments need restructuring” but it needed “revamping” also in that learning had to take place online and as a result, they experienced difficulty being present due to network and data issues (Participant 1, 2020; Participant 4, 2020). Moreover, due to not having access to their lecturers, they experienced difficulty in maintaining communication with their lecturers. This not only caused stress, but anxiety also in that they had to send out emails which resulted in waiting for responses since lecturers were occupied.

One participant mentioned that since lockdown, she faced difficulty in that the “isolation caused by the pandemic” contributed to her stress levels (Participant 2, 2020). For instance, time had become of the essence in that the time that she would generally allocate to doing varsity work (assignments, studying and keeping up), was “spent doing chores and gardening since our helpers have not been able to come in for work” (Participant 2, 2020).

Theme 2: Stress

Subtheme 1: Emotional response of stress (Anxiety/Pressure)

Anxiety refers to “future-orientated mood state, accompanied by strong negative affect is a normal emotional state that can be functional within certain limits” (Barlow and Durand, 2005, as cited in Burke, 2012, p. 105). This implies that they experience a functional level of anxiety about up-coming events (Burke, 2012).

It was discovered that all participants experienced anxiety, pressure or worry as an emotional response to stress. The sense of dread, terror, worry and anticipation of the future and what the future holds appeared to be a major form of distress particularly the pressure that comes with school work. It appeared that the anxiety and pressure experienced made them feel powerless which affected their school work in that they could not focus (Participants, 2020; Burke, 2012; Barlow et al., 2017). For instance, one participant mentioned she experiences anxiety when “overwhelmed with a certain situation that I feel I can’t control” (Participant 1, 2020), another mentioned “that awful feeling when I feel like I haven’t done enough when it comes to schoolwork” (Participant 4, 2020) and last but not least “built-up certain level of anxiety within me or worry” (Participant 5, 2020).

It appeared that all participants experienced a certain level of anxiety and experienced feelings of distress, apprehension and uneasiness (Burke, 2012; Barlow et al., 2017) when the time for assignments and Take-Home Assessments/Examinations approached. Participants felt apprehension thereby resulting in submitting work that is not only incomplete, but of low standard due to the uneasiness they experienced (Participants, 2020).

Therefore, the pressure that participants felt in terms of the challenges they faced with regards to mostly school work caused anxiety and stress for them. A number of participants mentioned that when the due dates for assignments approached, they felt uneasy and worried not only about how they would perform, but how to approach the assignments also. One participant mentioned that she “might read a question fifty times and not actually understand what you’re reading despite actually being capable of doing it” (Participant 2, 2020) due to the stress she felt. One participant mentioned that it was worse for her because she has Bipolar Type 1 Disorder. She mentioned “the condition itself generally makes you have a lot of anxiety and since it is in comorbidity with Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD), you get anxious almost every day, there is a battle you fight everyday” (Participant 4, 2020). So, anxiety as an emotional response to stress impacted on the students in ways that inevitably affected their education.

Subtheme 2: Physiological/ Cognitive response

It was discovered that participants experienced some form of burnout when they were stressed. A number of participants experienced tension, headaches, and the inability to concentrate with regards to doing school work or focusing on school when stressed. One participant mentioned that the burnout was a result of procrastination which resulted in her seeking ways to deal with the anxiety and pressure due to the inability to deal with it (Participant 4, 2020). In terms of decision making, almost all participants experienced some form of procrastination in that they believed that they had more than enough time to do their assignments so they decided to put work off for later. This led to elevated stress levels and anxiety in that not only did they experience difficulty in staying focused when the time came to do the work, but it overall affected how they moved forward from that situation.

Subtheme 3: Behavioural Responses

According to Lazarus' Primary Appraisal, if an individual decides that a situation is threatening, can cause injury, anger, disappointment, anxiety, or worry, a fear response may result hence the behaviour that results from the students when stressed is of importance to the researcher (Kail et al., 2019).

Therefore, when the researcher asked participants how stress affected them, approximately 70% of the participants mentioned ways they deal with the stress and anxiety they experience. It appeared that some participants received comfort from family and friends while others exercised or learned to manage their time differently. For instance, one participant mentioned that crying is therapeutic for her so sometimes, she would 'cry it out' (Participant 3, 2020), another mentioned calling friends to confide in them or watching a 'movie' (Participant 1), another mentioned taking 'time-out' (talking to her sister or taking a coffee break) (Participant 2, 2020), and last but not least practising to think positively by making time to study and having a 'to-do list'. These are but a few examples of how participants relieved their stress. In addition, exercise appeared to be therapeutic for 90% of the participants since it not only relieved the tension they felt, but overall made them felt better.

Findings in context

In terms of the environment, it was discovered that the environment impacted on the way learning took place for participants. Similar to undergraduate students, participants had to learn to adapt to the new learning environment (the online learning space) (Shankar & Park, 2016). This became a source of stress for postgraduate students in that not only did their attitudes and behaviour towards learning change but their concentration, emotions and attention also changed (Essel & Owusu, 2017).

Since learning took place at home, the environment became a place of 'relaxation' in that it allowed for procrastination to occur. Since that occurred, it allowed for students to neglect their work due to the fact that even if they missed classes, they could still do work through accessing recordings. This led to participants procrastinating even further since participants felt that they had more than enough time to complete both their assignments and their Take-Home Assessments since due dates were moved a month (Gomes, Faria, & Lopes, 2016).

In terms of how stress affected their emotions, a number of participants experienced anxiety, worry and pressure among others which not only affected their thinking, but their behaviour and the way they carried about with their days (Essel & Owusu, 2017). A number of participants mentioned feeling helpless in situations where they could not deal with the pressure and anxiety of being home. One participant mentioned that friends wanted to make plans with her but because of the school work she put off for later, she was worried and therefore could not stay focused and concentrated on school work. Another participant mentioned that due to feeling helpless, she would wallow in self-pity and cry it out (behavioural response) while another mentioned keeping her mind off work by watching a movie or keeping herself distracted from doing school. In essence, this not only resulted in making bad decisions, but decisions that elevated their stress levels. So, in terms of decision making (cognitive responses), the ability to reason logically was influenced by the notion/ assumption that time was on their side which resulted in disorganisation moving forward. In addition, the decisions made by the participants under stress are but an instance of decisions made under duress.

4.2. TRUSTWORTHINESS OF FINDINGS

Trustworthiness is important in qualitative research because it allows for merits of qualitative research to be described outside the parameters typically applied in quantitative research (Maree, 2019). It is used to promote understanding into the phenomenon observed (the factors that cause stress and the impact on stress on tertiary institute students). The researcher seeks to provide an in-depth understanding of the factors that cause stress among the student population and the impact of stress on the students according to the students' perception. In so doing, the researcher aims to use the concept of trustworthiness to measure credibility.

Credibility

The familiarity with the topic at hand will make the study credible. This is in the sense research has been done on the effects of stress on students before even though the focus was on undergraduate students. This being the case, it gives an idea that the data may be similar in that the experience may be similar because of the environment.

Transferability

The study is transferable in that the findings can be more or less applied to other students be it postgraduate students or undergraduate students studying in different faculties simple because connections may exist between the study and the students' personal experiences (Maree, 2019). This may be informative to those interested in the well-being of postgraduate students considering that they are nearing the work field in their specific fields.

Dependability

Since dependability takes into account the consistency of findings should the study to be replicated, it is worth noting that the research is dependable (Maree, 2019). Based on the research approach taken and the way the research is implemented in terms of the methods used to gather data, dependability can be reached if the steps are followed and the study is replicated based on how the research was conducted.

Conformability

It pays attention to the objectivity of the researcher with regards to data collection and analysis of the data collected from the participants (Maree, 2019). Conformability is reached when the researcher is able to conduct and interpret the data as is without being biased. The results from analysing the data and the data that is presented are all based of facts (information acquired from participants) without the researcher influencing them for personal reasons therefore ensuring conformability (Maree, 2019).

5. CONCLUSION

5.1. Summary of findings as they relate to the research question and objectives

Addressing the Research Question

1. What factors contribute to stress in postgraduate students and how does it impact on their academic success?

The environment had become a factor that contributed to stress among the participants due to recent COVID and lockdown events, it affected students' behaviour, cognition, their emotions and attention to mention but a few (Participants, 2020; Essel & Owusu, 2017; Shankar & Park, 2016). Due to this, a number of participants felt that they could not focus on their studies due to the amount of 'free time' that they had. This, along with being home in the presence of family members and friends caused some problems for some in that they had school work to do but had to put it off for later since there were things to sort out. For instance, some had family obligations, chores and friends who wanted to see them (Participant 1, 2020). When this occurred, a few felt that including family obligations and friends in their schedules, took some hours off from them focusing on their school work which resulted in stress and anxiety.

This resulted in participants inability to think things through (which address the research objective: the impact of stress on decision making) due to the pressure they felt. As a result, they made rash decisions which not affected their decision making in that when they felt helpless, they opted to "watching a movie" instead of seeking positive alternatives (Participant 1, 2020; Gifford & Nilsson, 2014). Other participants experienced academic pressure in that the fear of failure and the anxiety about due dates approaching affected the date when they would begin doing their assignments (Jithoo, 2017; Herath, 2012; Shankar & Park, 2016). Nonetheless, it ended positively for some in that they learned to allocate certain hours to working on school work, exercise/take a break at certain moments, thinking positively and last but not least, having a 'to-do' lists jotted (Participants, 2020).

In terms of academics, the anxiety and the pressure to complete assignments was caused by procrastination. This led to working overtime which led to more stress and anxiety in that since the due dates for assignments and assessments were moved to a certain time (Rabin, Fogel & Nutter-Upham, 2011; Essel & Owusu, 2017). As a result, assignments were started late which resulted in work that was not satisfactory to participants in terms of the effort that was put in and the type of work that was submitted as they were aware that they could in actual fact do better than the marks they received (addresses the objective: impact of stress on academic success/performance) (Participants, 2020; Rabin et al., 2011; Jithoo, 2017).

In conclusion, the major question was essentially answered as well as the objectives through how stress impacted on the participants. This is in the sense that the major factor that caused stress for participants was the new learning environment (online). It was a challenge for most because they had distractions within the home and with regards to what was happening at home that not only deterred them from being present in the time that classes were attended but in that they also had time on their hands of which led to procrastination and developing schedules that were not only different from their usual.

In terms of the objectives, a description of factors that cause stress in postgraduate students was answered in the main question. This did not only mention how these factors (the environment, procrastination, being helpless among others) affect students decision-making but it also explained the impact of these on academic success. That is, students did not put in as much effort in their school work because of family obligations and procrastination but distractions that came along with being at home for instance, watching movies. As a result, the research question and objectives were addressed in that a clear account/ picture was given with regards to how stress affects postgraduate students and the effects of the stress on the students.

5.2. Anticipated contribution of the study (Implications of findings)

The findings imply that students regardless of which level in education (undergraduate/postgraduate) and which faculty they are studying, experience stress (Zondi, 2018; Shankar & Park, 2016, Shete & Garkal, 2015; Yusoff & Rahim, 2010; Zegeye, Mossie, Gebrie, & Markos, 2018). As a result, the researcher has been made aware of this and understands that individuals regardless of faculty and level in education experience problems. Although these vary in prevalence and intensity (Mazumdar at al., 2012; Yusoff & Rahim, 2010), it is how these students deal with their stress that would make a difference to the public. This is in the sense that it will allow for those expectant of their children, brothers, sisters and last but not least students to remain focused and graduate in record time with excellent marks an understanding into the pressure the students may feel and how difficult it can be for them not only to talk about the problems they encounter but how they deal with them (Jithoo, 2017). As such, the study is aimed at not only informing the society of why this is so, but of why some students prefer keeping to themselves or end up engaging in dangerous behaviour to deal with their problems.

5.3. Ethical considerations

Affecting participants

Informed consent

Participants are acquainted with the nature of the research, goals of the research and nature of intervention so as to inform them of information such as whether or not they want their personal details protected or shared (du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014). The consent forms were sent to participants via email along with information sheets detailing what participation entailed.

Displaying the utmost respect and considerations

This implies following standardised protocols and procedures with participants. The researcher was able to follow protocols and inform participants of data to be used once collected from them. The researcher also made note of how the data was going to be kept safe (Maree, 2019).

Sensitive information

In terms of dealing with sensitive information, the researcher informed the participants of where the information collected would be saved so participants are comfortable with sharing their personal experiences if they wished (du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014).

5.4. Limitations of the study

- Reaching data saturation was a limitation in that although quality was achieved, it was difficult to achieve quantity due to the small sample size (unrepresentative sample) (Maree, 2019).
- Time and accessibility became a limitation in that some participants could not be reached. Those that could be reached either forgot that they had interviews or needed constant reminder from the researcher so as not to forget. Moreover, due to the pandemic, interviews were scheduled online (zoom) which was time and data consuming in that some participants took time to connect and even after connecting, experienced technical difficulties.

In conclusion, the researchers aim to make known the problems that postgraduate students encounter and why it is difficult for them to share their problems was achieved. Since, much was unknown for the reason that many studies focused on undergraduate students, through discovering discrepancies in the factors that cause stress and the way postgraduate students handle stress when compared to undergraduate students, information was obtained on the difference in level of thinking. This is in the sense that although most undergraduate students focus on short term goals (passing so as to move to second year), post graduate students are more focused on long term goals (entering the work field, marriage). Although differences were noted, there were similarities that could not be disregarded in that stress is experienced in spite of level of education.

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Research purpose/objective	Primary research question	Research rationale	Seminal authors	Literature review	Paradigm	Approach	Data collection methods	Ethics	Anticipated findings	References
Exploring the factors that cause stress and the impact of these on academic success/performance	What factors contribute to stress in postgraduate students and how does it impact on their academic success?	To explore the causes of stress and the impact of stress on students' academic success	Lazarus (appraisal and coping model)	Theme 1: environmental factors Theme 2: Stress Theme 3: academic factors	Interpretivism Epistemology: understanding people and their subjective experiences Ontology: social construct in that it will look at how people perceive their experiences/reality Axiology: understanding different perspectives	Qualitative	semi structured interviews	informed consent sensitive information displaying utmost respect and consideration	Discovering gaps in what students perceive as stressful on an honours level	(Abdullah et al., 2019) (du Plooy-Cilliers, Davis & Bezuidenhout 2014) (Maree, 2019) (Maree, Creswell, Ebersöh, Eloff, Ferreira, Ivankova, Jansen, Nieuwenhuis, Pietersen, Plano Clark, 2016) (Pillay & Ngcobo, 2010) (Zondi, 2018)
						Population				
						Private institute students (Honours students)				
Research problem	Secondary questions	Key concepts	Key theories			Sampling	Data analysis method	Limitations	Anticipated contribution	
Exploring factors that cause stress in postgraduate students and the impact of these on academic success/performance	Impact of stress on decision making, impact of stress on academic success/performance	Stress Academic stress Factors Academic success	Learned helplessness Lazarus (appraisal and coping model)			non probability sampling Purposive sampling	Qualitative content analysis	Time (availability accessibility) Inability to reach data saturation due to small sample size	insight to challenges student face and how they deal with them and making the society understand these students and their challenges	

7. Annexures

7.1. Annexure A – Concept Document

7.2. Annexure B – Information Sheet and Consent Form

Information sheet

To whom it may concern,

My name is Sanikie Mahlagaume and I am an honours student at the IIE Varsity College Sandton. I am currently conducting research under the supervision of Evelyn Naggayi titled [Exploring the factors that cause stress and the impact of their impact on academic success: A cross-sectional qualitative study on postgraduate students using semi-structured interviews](#). The study will involve the use of semi-structured interviews which will help in enhancing our understanding of how postgraduate students view stress and its impact on academic performance/success based on past experience. It will also enhance understanding in terms of what influences the postgraduate student's decision making, behaviour and how the postgraduate student feels and goes about dealing with challenges encountered.

I would like to invite you to participate in this research because I would like to find out if there is a difference in the way the postgraduate student thinks when compared to the undergraduate student in terms of the challenges faced and how these challenges impact on you. You can decide whether or not to participate in this research. If you decide to participate in this research, I would like to interview you, the interviews will be on an online platform (zoom) and will be recorded depending on which recording you are comfortable with (audio/video). Also, you can choose to withdraw at any time or decide not to answer particular interview questions if you do decide to participate.

Your names and contact details will be held private and will not be used for any other reason than to contact you for follow-up interviews. Every effort will be made to ensure confidentiality with regard to any identifying information that is obtained in connection to this study. Pseudonyms will be used for your names during the data collection process unless you choose otherwise. If you have any questions, do not hesitate to contact my supervisor or me at the numbers given below or via email.

My contact details/supervisors' details are as follows:

Sanikie Mahlagaume:

Evelyn Naggayi:

Informed consent for participation in an academic study

I, _____, agree to participate in the research project conducted by Sanikie Mahlagaume under the supervision of Evelyn Naggayi titled **Exploring the factors that cause stress and their impact on academic success: A cross-sectional qualitative study on postgraduate students using semi-structured interviews.**

I understand that:

1. The researcher is a student conducting the research as part of the requirements for an Honours Degree at the IIE Varsity College Sandton.
2. I will be interviewed about this topic for approximately 20 minutes on zoom
3. The interview will be audio/ video recorded
4. No information that may identify me will be included in the research report

As a participant, I am aware:

- Of what my participation entails
- Participation in this study is voluntary and I have the right to withdraw from the research at any time
- My confidentiality will be ensured and my name and personal details will be kept private unless I state otherwise
- I may choose not to answer questions asked during the interview
- I may be quoted directly but, my identity will be protected

Consent form for audio-recording/ video recording

I, _____, agree to allow Sanikie Mahlagaume to audio record my interviews as part of the research about the factors that cause stress and their impact on postgraduate students.

This research has been explained to me and I understand what participation in this research will involve. I understand that:

1. My confidentiality will be ensured. My name and personal details will be kept private unless I choose otherwise.
2. The recordings will be stored in a password protected file on the researcher's computer.
3. Only the researcher and the researcher's supervisor will have access to these recordings.

Signature

Date

Please feel free to contact me or my supervisor should you have any questions or concerns about this research, or if there is anything you need to know before you decide whether or not to participate.

7.3. Annexure C – Interview Schedule

Opening

(Establish Rapport) Good Morning/Afternoon, my name is Sanikie Mahlagaume and I am a student at the IIE Varsity College in Sandton. I am currently conducting research under the supervision of Evelyn Naggayi about the factors that cause stress and their impact on the academic success of postgraduate students.

(Purpose) I would like to ask you some questions about your background, your education and the experiences you have had in order to learn more about you in terms of how you view stress and how it has impacted on you based on your past experience(s).

Body

Personal story

1. May you please give your personal definition of stress?
2. What would you say are common causes of stress for you?
3. From personal experience as a student, what situations do you deem as stressful or contribute to your stress levels?
4. How has stress impacted on your health? (Mentally, physically, emotionally, cognitively, your behaviour)
5. How has stress affected your decision making?
6. What is the impact of stress on your academic performance/success?
7. What do you do when stressed? / How do you relieve stress?

Closing

Do you have any questions that you feel were not addressed or explained? Please do not hesitate to ask me for more information.

(Maintaining Rapport) Thank you for your time, I have learned/ obtained valuable information from you. Is there anything you think would be helpful for me to know? I should have all the information I need. Would it be alright to call you if I have any more questions? Thanks again, I appreciate that you took time to do this interview.

7.4. Annexure C – Ethical Clearance Letter

7.5. Annexure D – Examples of Data Collected

Question 2 repeated for one of the participants

The question is what are the common causes of the common causes of stress for you?

So, the common causes of stress for me would be the **uncertainty of certain situations**. Obviously because of **covid and everything**, we **don't know what's really going to happen with Varsity. Are we going to go back or not** and the **pressure of take-home exams**, like will we write? We have to **study for them differently** and so, that's **stressful** in itself because we don't wanna hear like 2 weeks before we have to go back that we have to write the exams because we all going to be **super anxious** about that so just the **uncertainty** also **about what's going to happen**. You know like what's going to happen next year. I mean luckily for us; we could all do zoom calls for interviews and stuff like that. If we didn't have this, how would we have conducted our research?

You know so I think that's those type of things that cause me **anxiety**. Also, handing in an assignment that you worked so hard for. Yes, we got to do submission 2 if we made it on time. But, if we did them and we thought that we did them really well and when you get your mark back and it's not what you expected, that also causes **stress and anxiety** to try redo them you know, cause now you going I thought I did well and then you can **lose a lot of it**. You know, the **confidence in yourself** based off of that I think also what causes me stress is just trying to **have a balance within life, having a balance between your friends, your family, your varsity** and even **stuck in isolation**, there's not been a moment where I've just really truly chilled. You know there's always been something to do which is **also blessing** but, it also gets a bit **tiresome** if you're trying to take a little bit of a break from this and that and I feel like because the timeline got extended, we **procrastinated a lot in certain areas of varsity**. You know, and then it was going you have to hand everything in like in a week. So, you have to **crunch and put everything into this week** and then you have, I have friends that are going we need to make plans because I haven't seen you in so long and obviously because of lockdown you weren't able to see anyone and so it's just **the pressure of trying to make everybody happy and trying to pass your degree** really, really well. I find is very stressful for me.