THE PREVALENCE OF STRESS AMONG INTERIOR DESIGN AND FURNITURE STUDENTS

Dr. Abeer A Alawad , Assistant Professor
Department of Housing, Interior Design and Furniture Faculty of Home Economics, King Abdulaziz University

Dr. Aml A Slamah, Assistant Professor
Department of Housing, Management of Housing and institutions
Faculty of Home Economics, King Abdulaziz University

Abstract

This study investigated the stressors experienced by students and aimed to determine the most prevalent cause of stress amongst university students studying Interior Design and Furniture. In addition, consideration was given to whether sources of stress differ depending on the students' year of study. The sample consisted of 59 female students from the second, third and fourth years of the Interior Design and Furniture course in the Housing Department, Faculty of Home Economics, at King Abdulaziz University, Jeddah. The method of investigation was a questionnaire which classified stress into three main themes: academic factors, environmental factors and personal factors. The results indicate that the largest source of stress for students was academic factors, while the most prevalent stressor was academic overload. Other stressful academic factors included unclear evaluation criteria, assessment deadlines, faculty absence during office hours and shortage of course references. A major environmental factor causing stress was linked to finding a studio environment and also a place to store work and equipment. The principal stressors regarding personal factors were fear of failure and concern about their future career. Most notably, there is no significant differences between different year levels in respect to the stress level p>0.05.

Keywords: Stress, Interior Design and Furniture students, academic factors, environmental factors, personal factors.

Introduction

Stress is indicative of today's fast-paced and results-orientated world. Specifically, stress amongst university students has been a topic of interest

for many researchers and teachers for a number of years. Researchers have been aware of the stressful nature of university life and the burden of this pressure on students' roles and expectations (Hamaideh, 2009). Quantitatively, university students face an increased risk of experiencing stress (Bataineh, 2013), while the problems that students face are qualitatively very different from those of their non-student peers (Redhwan, 2009).

Stress can be positive or negative, depending on the quantity. There are two main forms of stress, which are distress and eustress. Eustress is the amount of stress needed for an active, healthy life, whereas distress is a physical or emotional development causing strains that can lead to physical illness. Stress refers to "any event in which environmental demands, internal demands, or both, exceed the adaptive resources of an individual or social system" (Monat and Lazarus, 1977, p3). Stress can result from transitory or enduring causes, such as life events or an increase in workload. It can also occur due to predictable or unpredictable causes depending on the experience of control. Finally, it can have biological origins, such as disruption of bodily rhythms, social causes (e.g. interpersonal or work related) or environmental roots. Responses to stress can be emotional, behavioural, cognitive or physiological (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

According to the transactional model of stress (Lazarus, 1966), stressors are defined as demands made by the internal or external environment that upset the equilibrium, thus influencing physical and psychological wellbeing and requiring actions to restore balance. If the stressor is seen as a challenge, individuals are less likely to experience a negative stress reaction than if the stressor is interpreted as a threat.

Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) model of stress is a fundamental framework to consider when researching stress. This transactional model states that a person utilizes two levels of appraisal in selecting a coping response to a particular stressor. The first level is primary appraisal, where an individual evaluates whether the situation is potentially detrimental, threatening or challenging. Then, if the situation is perceived as threatening, the individual enters into the secondary appraisal stage, examining the available resources for coping strategies.

According to Pandya et al. (2012), stress in academic institutions can have both positive and negative consequences if not well-managed. Health and academic performance can be affected when stress is perceived negatively or becomes disproportionate (Misra et al., 2000; Campbell & Svenson, 1992). The occurrence of stress is extremely common among students, who "have to survive academically and to prepare themselves for further graduate or professional training" (Pandya et al., 2012, p 21). Attending university is a transitory time during a person's life and it is

obvious that various stressors will be triggered. These include the academic requirements of the course, time management, peer pressure, financial problems and difficulty adjusting to a new environment (Pandya et al., 2012). Failure to cope effectively with stressors will have serious professional and personal consequences. However, it is crucial that students should learn and obtain the knowledge and skills they need to contribute positively to society (Bataineh, 2013). It is clear that there is intense pressure on students to earn good grades and achieve a degree, contributing to stress that may in turn result in them dropping out of university (Shields, 2001).

Most students who gain a university place have high expectations placed on them by family or coming from within, which may in turn act as a catalyst to stress (Gadzella et al., 2004). Moreover, the amount of stress experienced by an individual may be influenced by his or her ability to react effectively to stressful events and situations (Moffat et al., 2004; Misra et al., 2000). People react differently to the same stressors due to personality and individual differences. An additional factor in how we deal with stress is gender. In a number of studies, women reported higher levels of stress than men (Al-Samadani & Al-Dharrab, 2013; Thawabieh & Qaisy, 2012; Hamaideh, 2010; Dahlin et al., 2005; Abouserie, 1994; Campbell & Svenson, 1992).

Thawabieh and Qaisy (2012) studied stress levels experienced by students at Tafila Technical University. Their main findings were that the students experienced a moderate level of stress and that the main factors associated with stress were social. This could be caused by the fact that the students originated from a number of different cities and perhaps their new environment caused problems due to issues with communication (Thawabieh & Qaisy, 2012). Another recent study by Bataineh (2013) surveyed 300 students from the College of Education at King Saud University. It found that among their sources of stress were academic overload, low motivation and high family expectations. The majority of respondents experienced some moderate stress, which is to be expected in a university environment. Fear of failure has been identified as the major source of stress among undergraduate students (Al-Samadani & Al-Dharrab, 2013; Bataineh, 2013). More specifically, completing examination requirements was one of the main factors that caused stress amongst female students in the Faculty of Dentistry at King Abdulaziz University (Al-Samadani and Al-Dharrab, 2013).

Hamaideh (2009) explored the sources of stressors and reactions to stressors amongst university students and found that self-imposed stressors accounted for the majority of stress. In particular, Hamaideh found that cognitive responses and individual thinking patterns played a significant role in students' perception of stress. A related study by Abouserie (1994) investigated the sources and levels of stress in relation to locus of control and

self esteem in students attending the University of Wales, College of Cardiff. Locus of control is a construct which assesses a person's perceived control over events in their lives. The research found a significant positive correlation between locus of control and academic stress, suggesting that students with external beliefs are more stressed than those with internal locus of control. People with an internal locus of control believe they are responsible for the events in their lives. Another relevant finding of this study is that there was a significant negative correlation between self-esteem and stress; thus, students with high self-esteem are often less stressed than those with low self-esteem. Results indicated that students were most affected by stressors related directly to their studies. As hypothesised, examinations and their results were the most important stressors, followed by work overload, the amount to learn and the pressure to do well (Abouserie, 1994).

Dahlin et al. (2005) investigated exposure to various stressors and the prevalence of depression among medical students. Gender differences were found, whereby women scored much higher for stress and depression than men, while levels of stress also varied between the different stages of education. Students in year 1 indicated that stressors were linked to workload and lack of feedback, whereas year 3 students rated their worries about future competence as a key stressor. Students in the final years had less stress concerning their work burden, but instead were critical about their education and their psychosocial development. Year 6 students also gave higher ratings than the other groups to a 'non-supportive climate'. Students in all three groups complained that lack of feedback was a key stressor. In conclusion, medical students had higher depression rates than the general population. The incidence of depressive symptoms among students was 12.9%, significantly higher than in the general population, and it was 16.1% among female students versus 8.1% among males (Dahlin et al., 2005).

Earlier research by Archer and Lamnin (1985) explored the issue of personal and academic stress. They found a number of stressors such as tests, competition between peers for top grades and lack of time as the primary academic stressors, while intimate relationships, parental relationships and finances achieved the highest ratings as personal stressors. Other potential sources of stress include excessive homework, assignments, examinations, disagreements with lecturers and uncomfortable working environments/classrooms (Hirsch & Ellis, 1996; Kohn & Frazer, 1986). Student's levels of stress can also be negatively influenced by personal stressors including poor relationships with family and peers, changes to eating and sleeping patterns, unhealthy habits and loneliness (Hudd et al., 2000). Shaban et al. (2012) explored the levels and types of stress perceived by nursing students in Jordan. The findings indicate that the main sources of

stress for these students were assignment work and the clinical working environment. Radcliff and Lester (2003) studied perceived stress among medical undergraduates and found that class workload was the most stressful factor for students in their final year.

This current study recognises that stress is a serious issue that permeates university life and can have devastating effects. The research was developed from an interaction with students during the teaching/learning process and the observation that some were visibly suffering from stress. Previous research investigating student stress proved limited. This study enables comparisons to be made between students of different years and different disciplines. Identifying reactions to different types of stress within this particular group of students will help teachers and administrators to deal with those stressors early, thus eliminating their negative consequences (Hamaideh, 2009). Therefore, the aim of this study is to identify the most prevalent stressors amongst Interior Design and Furniture students.

Materials and Methods

The study participants were 59 second, third and fourth year Interior Design and Furniture students at the Faculty of Home Economics, King Abdul Aziz University. The research was guided by the following primary research question: *What is the most prevalent cause of stress amongst Interior Design and Furniture students*? This generated a two-part secondary question: *Does the most prevalent cause of stress differ with the students' level and year of study*?

Data were gathered using a modified questionnaire from Abouserie's 1994 study (ASQ), which was suitable for Interior Design and Furniture students. A panel of experts on educational research at the King Abdulaziz University Jeddah supported the validity of the research questionnaire, which was then presented to five students who were asked to complete it. This pilot study enabled necessary changes to be made to the questionnaire.

The first section sought general information on status, year, level and age. The remainder of the questionnaire was divided into three themes, covering academic, environmental and personal factors. Academic questions, numbered 4-18, included statements concerning lecturer communication, educational tools, educational resources, classroom activities and evaluation. Questions 19-24 examined environmental factors, covering university and home environments. Finally, questions 25-36 focused on personal factors, both internal and external. Each question had three options: (1) no stress, (2) mild to moderate stress and (3) severe stress. Each student was required to choose the most appropriate option, in relation to her own perspective, for each potential source of stress. The questionnaires were distributed during the 2014 academic year after the exams at the end of the second semester, to

allow students to participate without pressure. Eighty questionnaires were distributed and 59 were completed. Statistical analysis was carried out using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS Inc, Chicago, IL, USA) Version 16, and Kruskal–Wallis was employed to assess the significance of relations and statistical value was set at $p<0.05$.

Results

The obtained data revealed that the largest proportion of respondents (47.5%) was from the fourth year, while 30.5% were from the third year and 22% from the second year (Figure 1).
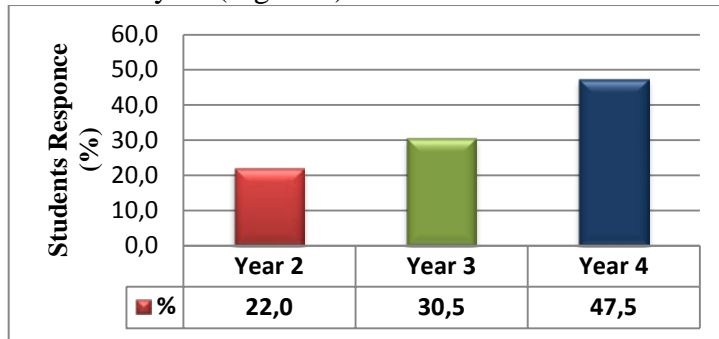

Figure 1. Percentages of students who responded, by year.

Table 1, shows the categories of stress levels that used in analysis of research questionnaire. The data were analysed aiming to identify the most prevalent cause of stress amongst Interior Design and Furniture students and to explore any variation related to the students' level.

Table 1. Categories of stress levels.

Stress Level	Mean
No Stress	<1.67
Mild to Moderate Stress	2.33-1.67
Severe Stress	>2.33

Table 2, summarizes the mean and standard deviation of responses to each questionnaire item of *academic* factors ranked according to the severity of stress. Academic overload was the most prevalent cause of severe stress with mean (M) of 2.86 and standard deviation (SD) of 0.35, followed by unclear evaluation criteria (M=2.83, SD=0.5), projects timings and deadlines (M=2.76, SD=0.54), faculty absence during office hours (M=2.46, SD=0.7), and shortage of course references (M=2.37, SD=0.76). Furthermore, all remaining academic factors represents Mild to Moderate Stress, where the lowest source of stress was the type of course curriculum with (M=1.75, SD=.58). The overall (M) and (SD) for all academic factors was (2.29) and (0.26) which represents a Mild to Moderate Stress.

Table 2. Mean and Standard Deviation of responses to each *Academic factor* ranked according to the severity of stress.

Item NO	Items	Mean	SD	Level of stress
12	Academic overload	2.86	0.35	Severe
18	Unclear evaluation criteria	2.83	0.50	Severe
15	Project times and deadlines	2.76	0.54	Severe
6	Absence of faculty member in office hours	2.46	0.70	Severe
7	Shortage of course references	2.37	0.76	Severe
10	Lack of educational tools	2.31	0.53	Mild to moderate
13	Involvement in group activities	2.27	0.69	Mild to moderate
4	Faculty attitude	2.24	0.63	Mild to moderate
5	Explanation of lectures	2.20	0.61	Mild to moderate
17	Final examinations and their results	2.20	0.58	Mild to moderate
9	Misuse of educational tools	2.19	0.57	Mild to moderate
14	Types of essays, projects	2.15	0.52	Mild to moderate
16	Periodical evaluation	1.98	0.60	Mild to moderate
11	Type of educational tools	1.85	0.64	Mild to moderate
8	Type of course curriculum	1.75	0.58	Mild to moderate
Overall mean, standard deviation, and level of stress for Academic factors		**2.29**	**0.26**	**Mild to moderate**

Table 3, summarizes the mean and standard deviation of responses to each *environmental* factors of questionnaire item ranked according to the severity of stress. In relation to environmental factors, lockers to store their belongings with (M=2.75, SD=0.58), followed by studio environment with (M=2.58, SD=0.62) where the students reported severe stress. Classroom environment (M=2.17, SD=0.56) and software sources (M=2.17, SD=0.77) represents Mild to Moderate Stress. The overall (M) and (SD) for all environmental factors was (2.06) and (0.3) which represents a Mild to Moderate Stress.

Table 3. Mean and Standard Deviation of responses to each *Environmental factor* ranked according to the severity of stress.

Item NO	Items	Mean	SD	Level of stress
22	Lockers to keep belongings	2.75	0.58	Severe
20	Studio environment	2.58	0.62	Severe
19	Classroom environment	2.17	0.56	Mild to moderate
21	Software sources	2.17	0.77	Mild to moderate
23	Home atmosphere	1.39	0.59	None
24	Space to work at home	1.29	0.53	None
Overall mean, standard deviation, and level of stress for Environmental factors		**2.06**	**0.30**	**Mild to moderate**

Table 4, summarizes the mean and standard deviation of responses to each questionnaire item of *personal* factors ranked according to the severity of stress. Fear of failure was the most prevalent cause of severe stress with (M=2.59, SD=0.65), followed by worry about future career (M=2.47, SD=0.82), Time management (M=2.42, SD=0.68), Balance between university and home (M=2.41, SD=0.59), and Lack of confidence about being successful (M=2.36, SD=0.74). In addition, all remaining personal factors represents Mild to Moderate Stress and no stress. The overall (M) and (SD) for all personal factors was (M=2.01, SD=0.37) which represents a Mild to Moderate Stress.

Table 4. Mean and Standard Deviation of responses to each *Personal factor* ranked according to the severity of stress.

Item NO	Items	Mean	SD	Level of stress
32	Fear of failure	2.59	0.65	Severe
36	Worry about future career	2.47	0.82	Severe
27	Time management	2.42	0.68	Severe
29	Balance between university and home	2.41	0.59	Severe
30	Lack of confidence about being successful	2.36	0.74	Severe
35	Family expectation of success	2.00	0.67	Mild to moderate
26	Lack of time for family and friends	1.93	0.69	Mild to moderate
28	Financial problems	1.80	0.76	Mild to moderate
34	Competition over classwork	1.78	0.79	Mild to moderate
25	Marital status	1.73	0.78	Mild to moderate
31	Personal health problems	1.34	0.61	None
33	Social contact with students	1.34	0.61	None
Overall mean, standard deviation, and level of stress for Personal factors		**2.01**	**0.37**	**Mild to moderate**

Figure 2, illustrates that the stress levels experienced by student are mild to moderate in varying degrees. The results reveals that the highest source of stress for students was academic factors. The degree of stress for academic, environmental, and personal factors between different year levels were statistically analysed by Kruskal–Wallis statistical analysis of variance indicated that there is no significant differences between different year levels $p > 0.05$ (Table 5).

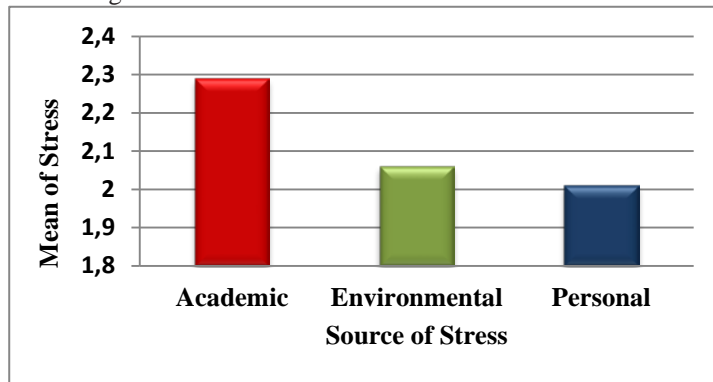Figure 2. Overall level of stress for different factors.

Table 5. Kruskal–Wallis   statistical analysis output of variance to analyze the degree of stress for academic, environmental, and personal factors between different year levels.

Factors	Year	N	Mean Rank	Chi-Square	df	Sig.
Academic	2	13	35.69	1.932	2	0.381
	3	18	27.58			
	4	28	28.91			
Environmental	2	13	30.50	0.073	2	0.964
	3	18	29.11			
	4	28	30.34			
Personal	2	13	28.88	0.575	2	0.750
	3	18	28.08			
	4	28	31.75			

Discussion

The main finding of this research is that academic factors were the most prevalent causes of stress amongst Interior Design and Furniture students. The factors that were deemed most stressful were academic overload, then unclear evaluation criteria, project deadlines, absence of faculty in office hours and searching for course references. As Interior Design and Furniture is a practical course, this provides some insight into these results. Unclear evaluation criteria can be deemed stressful because the evaluation is divided into different steps within the project, with a deadline related each step. In addition, absence of faculty during office hours can create stress because the students may need further support from their tutors. Searching for course references can cause students stress because most of the academic sources in design are in English, whilst the course is in Arabic. This means that translation can be a major source of stress and there can be uncertainty regarding meanings of words. The result that academic overload is a catalyst for stress is consistent with previous research undertaken by

Bataineh (2013). Furthermore, Shaban et al. (2012) and Radcliff and Lester (2003) also found that the main sources of stress were related to academic factors.

The major environmental stressors concerned storage and space. Many students needed a locker to keep their belongings, because the tools and work produced in this discipline are often heavy and cumbersome. Some projects required the students to keep a larger piece safe and secure whilst creating e.g. colour projects. Shaban et al (2012) acknowledge the environment as a source of stress, although in their case this was the clinical environment rather than the learning environment.

Personal factors were also listed in the questionnaire and the severest sources of stress were found to be students' fear of failure and concerns about their future career. This result is in agreement with that of Al-Samadani and Al-Dharrab, 2013, and Bataineh, 2013, who reports fear of failure as the major source of stress among undergraduate students, whilst worries about future career paths are consistent with the results of Dahlin et al. (2005). Pandya et al. (2012) note that time management is a crucial factor in the management of stress and can create a vicious circle where anxiety leads to lack of concentration, which then causes more panic.

Academic factors were the most prevalent sources of stress in years two and three. Year two students also faced more severe stress than their year three and four counterparts, perhaps because they were effectively in the first year of the course proper, year one being a foundation year. Alternatively, the difference may have been due to personal experience and issues with confidence. As year four is the final year, the most prevalent source of stress was linked to unclear evaluation criteria as students worked towards their final projects and their work was graded at each step. In relation to environmental factors, all years agreed that storage was the most problematic element, as the tools required were heavy. Year two students were also unfamiliar with their new university environment. Finally, the most stressful personal factor for year two and three respondents was fear of failure, while those in years three and four reported being worried about their future career, which was a less immediate concern for those in year two. Although, statistical analysis revealed that there is no significant differences between different year levels p>0.05.

This study is extremely significant, as no previous research has ever looked at the discipline of interior design and furniture in relation to stress. The strength of evidence is enhanced by the fact that reliable patterns of findings have previously been established in other disciplines. The implications of this study are useful for universities and other academic institutions across the world that specialise in this subject. The results may also prove beneficial to academic curriculum advisors, implementers and

writers. It is crucial to acknowledge and deal with the issue of stress before it becomes a pandemic in academic society, threatening students' love of learning and willingness to study. Possibly alternative forms of assessment could be considered and might help to balance the workload more evenly throughout the year. It should be highlighted to students that stress is a common problem and help should be available for all year groups. A longitudinal study of this discipline might prove advantageous, to investigate the sources of stress and precisely how they change throughout the years. Following a cohort of students through the actual course might shed further light on their experience of stress.

Conclusion

Stress clearly affected the majority of students in this study. The most prevalent causes were academic factors, most notably academic overload. The evidence also indicates that students needed a clear space for storage and working, an environmental factor which can easily be remedied. The principal personal stressors included fear of failure and concern about their future careers. The Interior Design and Furniture curriculum should be amended and improved to overcome future stressors. These strategies should lead to a reduction in the negative effects of stress whilst enabling curriculum designers to be aware of stress triggers and how to reduce these. The high levels of stress among students discovered in this research underline the need for academic orientation and a clear response to stress. Institutions must be aware of the prevalence of stress amongst students, as this can affect their psychological and physiological health, academic grades and ultimately, whether they can continue on the course. These findings offer a timely insight into the experience and nature of student stress and suggest practical solutions that can be implemented to alleviate stress.

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