



# Understanding The Stressors and Coping Strategies Among MBA Students in Malaysia

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## **Abstract**

*The research aimed to explore the associated factors related to causes of stress and coping strategies among post graduate students. A quantitative research was carried out and the samples were the MBA students in a renowned business school in Malaysia. Total participants were 150 students, with 37.3% male and 62.7% female. The three major sources of stress among students were identified as academic related stress, time related stress and social/environmental related stress. The results suggested that the major stressor among these students was indeed the academic related stress. In addition, among the four coping strategies studied, it was discovered that active problem coping was the most applied by many. From the findings of the study, it also showed that race had no significant relationships with the stressors and coping strategies. This study contributed both to the academics and the education industry. For the former, the study has managed to provide further understanding on the issue of stress particularly among MBA students. Simultaneously, the same understanding is also beneficial practically for business schools in their efforts to create a good and challenging environment to enhance students' learning.*

**Keyword:** *stress, coping strategy, students, race, Malaysia*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Over the years, research had managed to show that Asian students as opposed to American students had different priorities when come to academic stressors relevant to them (e.g. Archer & Lamnin, 1985; Kohn & Frazer, 1986; Murphy & Archer, 1996; Ross, Niebling & Heckert, 1999). On the other hand, Li, Lin, Bray, & Kehle (2005) found that general pattern of academic stressors between American and Chinese university students were quite similar, although differentiations do exist in the ranking of the stressors.

Master of Business Administration or in short called MBA is one of the most extensively pursued master's degree across the globe. Its general aim in training students to better understand the organizations and to master developments had



managed to attract many prospective students. The high expectations imposed on the students normally created in a high level of stress. Brown and Ralph (1999) found that there was an increase in the level of stress suffered by students in higher education system.

Based on the justifications above, this study was conducted to assess the differences that might be expected among Malaysian MBA students in terms of the relevant stressors and the coping strategies adopted.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Different people may experience different stress from different events. By a simple definition, stress is 'a basic psychological stress that occurs when the individual is under a threat' (Foot, 1991, pg.9). Driskell and Salas (1996) assigned stress in two forms: i) acute stress which resulted from short occurrence that disturbed one's achievement, and ii) chronic stress which resulted from repeated occurrences of one's achievements. A common response to stress is said to be flight or fight. When the body nervous system is aroused, hormones are released to sharpen the senses, quicken the pulses, increase respiration and tense the muscle. All of those help to defend against threatening situations (NIOSH, 2000).

Stress are commonly noted among university students (Towbes & Cohen, 1996) as they are required to juggle many things at the same time including maintaining good results and adjusting to the new social environment. Towards the end of their study, other issues such as the need to land on good jobs adds to the existing ones, creating a higher level of stress (D'Zurilla & Sheedy, 1991). Studies had shown that people with higher level of stress scored lower on self-perception, and self-esteem (e.g. Goldman & Wong, 1997; Hudd, Dumlao, Erdmann-Sager, Murray, Phan, Soukas, & Yokozuka, 2000). However, Andersen and Pulich (2001) highlighted that not all stress experienced by the students are negative. As mentioned by Korthage (2003), several types of stress are able to stimulate students.

Stressors are commonly defined as factors that resulted in stress. Recent years had seen the issues of academic stress becoming popular. The work of Wright way back in 1967 had shown various elements as the main stressors to students. Among the stressors include work overload, relationship with people, loneliness, fear of failure and time management. Similar stressors were reported to be experienced by students in Kohn and Frazer (1986) and Hirsch and Ellis (1996).

In 2007, Byrne, Davenport and Mazanov analyzed 58 elements of stressors that lead to ten categories of stressors. Out of those ten, four categories were academic related. The others seemed to relate to the issues of interpersonal relationship,



financial pressures uncertainty about the future, and the prospect of adult responsibility and home life.

When talking about stress and stressors, the issue of stress management or coping strategies cannot be avoided. As defined by Bojuwoye (2000), coping strategies are the change of cognitive and behavior efforts of a person in managing specific external or internal demands that are deduced to exceed a person's resources. Kausar and Munir (2004) stated the coping behavior to come from two sources; emotional and problem management. Folkman and Lazarus (1985) had used emotional and problem management coping methods as the basis for develop the Ways of Coping Checklist (WCC). Their study highlighted two situations. When individuals faced a stressor that they can control, they would most probably responded with problem management coping. However, when individuals faced stressor that they cannot control, they would most probably respond with emotional coping (Lazarus & Folkman 1984). Past studies had shown various indications of coping strategies. Justice (1988) earlier developed a coping matrix to be used in explaining the coping resources and coping strategies. Pines and Aronson (1988) categorized the coping method into four which were direct/action, direct/nonaction, indirect/action, and indirect/nonaction. In this case, the direct/action was indicated as the most active and beneficial method while direct/nonaction was indicated as the vice versa. Many other studies also in general studied two main coping strategies which are problem focused and emotional focused (e.g. Thoits, 1995; Carver & Scheier, 1994).

According to Chew-Graham, Rogers and Yassin (2003), it is important for students to develop different coping strategies in order to encounter and manage stressful conditions. If not handled well, the stressors that originated from financial problems, sleep deprivation, societal activities and many more can affect student's ability to perform. Womble (2004) discovered that a correlation exists between the level of stress perceived by students and their academic performance.

Based on the literature above, this study seek to find answers to these questions:

1. What kind of stressors affects the MBA students in Malaysia?
2. What kind of coping strategies adopted by the MBA students in Malaysia?
3. What are the relationships between race and the stressors among MBA students in Malaysia?
4. What are the relationships between race and the coping strategies among MBA students in Malaysia?



## METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted at one of the renowned business school in Malaysia. Questionnaires were sent to 200 MBA students with only 150 questionnaires completed, giving a response rate of 75%.

A five page questionnaire containing 3 sections was designed to measure the required variables. Section A was meant to obtain information about the respondent's personal and professional data. Seven questions were included in this section like gender, race, age, working status, and the like.

Section B focused on the measurement for sources of work stress or stressors adopted from Burge (2009). It comprised of 22 items posed on the different sources, academic related stress (e.g. sitting for examinations, studying for examinations), time-related stress (e.g. lack of free/leisure time, time pressures/deadlines), and social/environmental related stress (e.g. thinking about the future, financial expenses). The level of stress was measured on the respondent on a five-point Likert scale (1 = not at all stressful, 2 = a little bit stressful, 3 = moderate stressful, 4 = very stressful, 5 = extremely stressful).

Lastly, in Section C, the measurement for coping strategies adopted from Ying & Farn (2010) was added. This measurement consists of 28 statements such as I try to do or think of some things that will make me feel happier, and allow myself to relax; I give up and blame God for being unfair when I face stress; I search and look for related data from the library or the Internet to do my homework; I leave aside the problem first. The four major coping strategies of student stress among MBA students were defined as follows:

1. Active emotional coping - points at individuals adopting the attitude of emotional adjustment first, when faced with stress.
2. Passive emotional coping - points at a passive situation that appears when an individual faces with stress.
3. Active problem coping - points at instances when individual faced with stress, solve their problems by looking at the centre of the problem and assist themselves or search for assistance.
4. Passive problem coping - points at individuals adopting procrastinating and evasive behaviors when facing stress.

In general, the instruments used in this research were accepted to have adequate internal consistency. The reliability analyses for the stressors and coping strategies are shown in Table 1.



**Table 1: Reliability Analysis Results**

Description	N of Items	Cronbach's Alpha ( $\alpha$ )
Stressors	22	0.817
Coping Strategies	28	0.720

All the constructs are deemed acceptable as each of the Alpha value is above 0.6, which is within the acceptable range of internal consistency for a study (Cronbach, 1951).

## **FINDINGS OF THE STUDY**

### ***Demographic Profile***

In Table 2, 62.7% of the MBA students were female while another 37.5% were male. This was very much similar to the students' population in the university. From the same Table, it was derived that the largest races in the group were the Chinese with 64 respondents (42 %) followed by the Malays with 51 respondents (42.7 %), the Indians with 21 respondents (14%), and finally the Others with 14 respondents (9.3%). The age profile of the MBA students indicated that 54.7% of the sample size was below or equal 25 years old. Another 38% were aged between 26-35 years and only 7.3% were aged between 36-45 years. It seemed that the current generation had decided to pursue their MBAs quite early.

In addition, Table 2 also showed 17.3% of the students to be married as opposed to another 82% who were single. Out of the 150 participants, 35.3% were already employed while the rest of the participants (64.7%) were not working. The employed students were either awarded study leaves or attended the night classes for part timers.

Overall, Table 2 illustrated that the CGPA of the respondents with 93 respondents (62%) of the group are within the range of high CGPA (between 3.51 to 4.0). However, there were 4 respondents (2.7 %) with low CGPAs (below 3.0) while another 53 respondents (35.3%) were considered to be average (between 3.01 to 3.50).



**Table 2: Socio-Demographic Profile of the Respondents**

<b>Demographic Factor</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent (%)</b>
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	56	37.3
Female	94	62.7
Total	150	100.0
<b>Race</b>		
Malay	51	34.0
Chinese	64	42.7
Indian	21	14.0
Other	14	9.3
Total	150	100.0
<b>Age</b>		
Below and equal 25 years	82	54.7
26 to 35 years	57	38.0
36 to 45 years	11	7.3
Total	150	100.0
<b>Marital Status</b>		
Single	123	82.0
Married	26	17.3
Other	1	0.7
Total	150	100.0
<b>Working Status</b>		
Employed	53	35.3
Unemployed	97	64.7
Total	150	100.0
<b>Current CGPA</b>		
Low (Below 3.0)	4	2.7
Average (3.01-3.5)	53	35.3
High (3.51-4.0)	93	62.0
Total	150	100.0

### ***Stressors among MBA Students***

In order to examine the major sources that contribute to stress among the respondents, the means were used. From the results in Table 3, academic related stress was seen as the most common source of stress ( $\bar{X} = 3.8822$ ,  $\sigma = 0.9443$ ). Indirectly, it means that the most common stressor encountered by MBA students were due to academic related issues. This was followed closely by time related stress ( $\bar{X} = 3.6545$ ,  $\sigma = 0.9434$ ). The reason is perhaps due to the need of the students to complete a number of courses within 3-4 months. Social/ environment related stress was the least important stressor ( $\bar{X} = 3.0073$ ,  $\sigma = 1.0344$ ) affecting this group of students.



**Table 3: Sources of stress among MBA students**

Source(s) of stress	Means	Standard Deviation
Academic related stress	3.8822	0.9443
Time related stress	3.6545	0.9434
Social/environment related stress	3.0073	1.0344

### ***Coping Strategies among MBA Students***

The means were also used to assess the coping strategies among MBA students. The results in Table 4 showed that active problem coping is the most common strategy which students adopted to deal with stress ( $\bar{X} = 3.8056$ ,  $\sigma = 0.8950$ ). In addition, the analysis also indicated that active emotional coping ( $\bar{X} = 3.7400$ ,  $\sigma = 0.8857$ ), and passive problem coping ( $\bar{X} = 2.3578$ ,  $\sigma = 1.0868$ ) ranked the second and third respectively. The least adopted coping strategy among this group of students was passive problem coping ( $\bar{X} = 2.6500$ ,  $\sigma = 1.1092$ ).

**Table 4: Coping Strategies of the MBA students**

Coping strategies	Means	Standard deviation
Active emotional coping	3.7400	0.8857
Passive emotional coping	2.3578	1.0868
Active problem coping	3.8056	0.8950
Passive problem coping	2.6500	1.1092

### ***The relationships between Race on Stressors and Coping Strategies among MBA Students***

**Table 5: Chi-square Test of Independence for Race and Stressors**

Variables	Value	df	Asymp. Sig.(2-sided)
Chi-Square			
Academic related stress	7.972 <sup>a</sup>	6	0.240
Time related stress	9.048 <sup>a</sup>	6	0.171
Social/ environment related stress	4.947 <sup>a</sup>	6	0.551

In relations to possible relationships between race and the stressors, Table 5 showed none of them were significant.



**Table 6: Chi-square Test of Independence for Race and Coping Strategies**

	Variables	Value	df	Asymp. Sig.(2-sided)
Chi-Square	Active emotional coping	5.175 <sup>a</sup>	6	0.522
	Passive emotional coping	5.104 <sup>a</sup>	6	0.531
	Active problem coping	4.534 <sup>a</sup>	6	0.605
	Passive problem coping	5.552 <sup>a</sup>		0.475

Table 6 focused on the chi-square results between race and coping strategies. Similarly, none of the coping strategies was deemed to be significant with race.

## DISCUSSIONS OF THE RESULTS

This study engaged a total of 150 MBA students as respondents. The sources of students' stress or stressors assessed in the study were academic related stress, time related stress, and social/environment related stress. While the coping strategies involved were active emotional coping, passive emotional coping, active problem coping, and passive problem coping. The purpose of the study was to find the common stressors and coping strategies surrounding the MBA students in Malaysia. At the same time, the study aimed to see the differences that might exist across races among the same group of students in terms of both variables.

The results of the study showed that the major source of stress or stressor experienced by the MBA students was the academic related stress. This is in line with studies done by Wright (1967), Kohn and Frazer (1986), Hirsch and Ellis (1996), and Byrne, Davenport and Mazanov (2007). In addition, the results indicated that the major coping strategy being adopted by the MBA students in Malaysia was active problem strategy and the least being used was passive emotional coping. The results showed some similarities with the one conducted by Lazarus and Folkman in 1984, and Folkman and Lazarus in 1985. One interesting findings of the study is that no differences were observed in either the stressors or the coping strategies in relation to race. It seemed to show that even though Malaysia consists of different races, the behavior of the races in terms of the MBA students were not strikingly different in regards of stress issues.

There are several limitations to the study. One of the key limitations of the study is the time restriction. Due to the lack of time in data collection, the number of participants for the study was stopped at 150 participants. This may not truly reflect the general population of the chosen group classification. Secondly, the scope of stress studied should be widened to other possible variables most importantly performance.



This research was conducted and intended to be a preliminary study in obtaining a general understanding on the issues of stress among MBA students in Malaysia. Further research can be conducted to look at the relationships of both stressors and coping strategies on students' academic and also work performance. In addition, a follow up should be done qualitatively so that richer data can be gathered. Finally, larger samples should be considered to increase the representation of the MBA student's population in Malaysia.

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