

Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (Included Submissions)

0548

Mitigating the Impact of Stressful Life Experiences on Study Burnout from a C-O-R Perspective:
Lessons Gained from the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Research Domain: Student experiences (SE)

Abstract: The COVID-19 has caused major disruption in higher education and the study experience of students has been immensely impacted. Across the world, rates of depression and burnout has skyrocketed and in some countries the rate of suicide among university students has known a drastic increase. There is a need to advance our knowledge with regards to the mechanisms underlying the formation of stress and burnout among higher education students. In this study, the conservation of resources theory and the integration of stressful life experiences framework are used to propose a theoretical model. The study thus aims to test a predictive model of study burnout in higher education based on the C-O-R theory and with the inclusion of the ISLE concept as a mediator. More specifically, the following research questions are addressed: (1) do resources and demands influence study burnout?; (2) do greater resources reduce loss of meaning due to COVID-19 stressful experience?; (3) does higher level of loss of meaning due to COVID-19 stressful experiences result in higher level of study burnout; (4) do resources and demands indirectly influence burnout through COVID-19 induced stress.

Paper: Background of the Study

The higher education sector has not been spared by the COVID-19 crisis (Dennis, 2020; Eringfeld, 2021; Kandri, 2020). A living experience of the “adapt or perish” concept in its “true sense”. Very far from the commonly used “publish or perish” metaphor which denotes the questionable practice of a rat race competition for academic publications (Moosa, 2018). Indeed, in a climate of dreadful uncertainty where individuals and organisations are being pushed by survival instincts, universities around the world have been forced to adapt. A change which includes: the implementation of new policies; the re-engineering of internal administrative and academic processes; and the shift to new modes of teaching and learning (Mishra et al, 2020; Schalkwyk. 2021). For example, the University of Cambridge, decided to shift their lectures to a fully online mode for one full academic year (Eringfeld, 2021; Scialom, 2020). Loyal to our reputation as the Homo sapiens (wise man) species, one of the most adaptable species on earth (Coolidge and Wynn, 2018; Harari, 2014), we are rising to a major challenge once again. While we are most certainly destined to emerge through the storm and grow into a stronger and more resilient society once more, needless to say that it is not without much pain and a heavy price to pay. The price is not only economical but also psychological (van Hoof, 2020; WHO, 2020). Since the start of the pandemic, there has been an upsurge in psychological distress which is connoted by concepts such as anxiety, depression and burnout (Brewer, 2020; Fessell and

Cherniss, 2020). Those adverse psychological impacts are inescapably observed among the stakeholders of higher education (Milliken, 2020; Pope-Ruark, 2020).

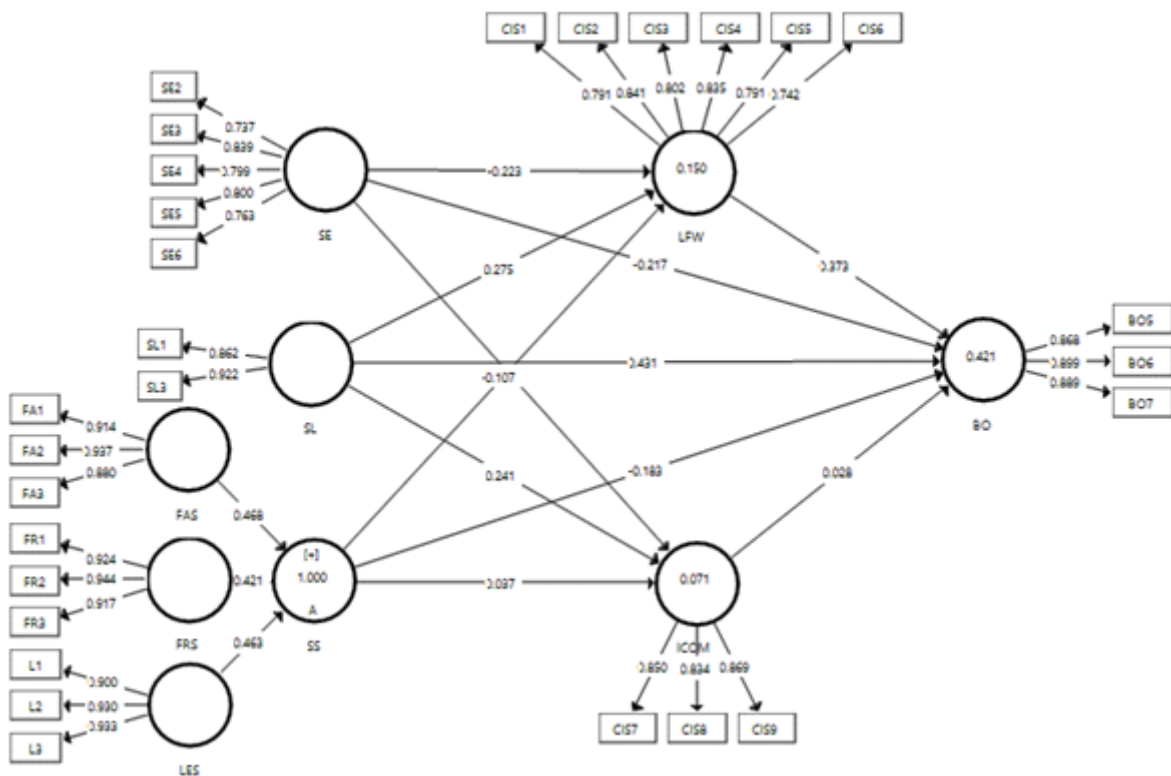
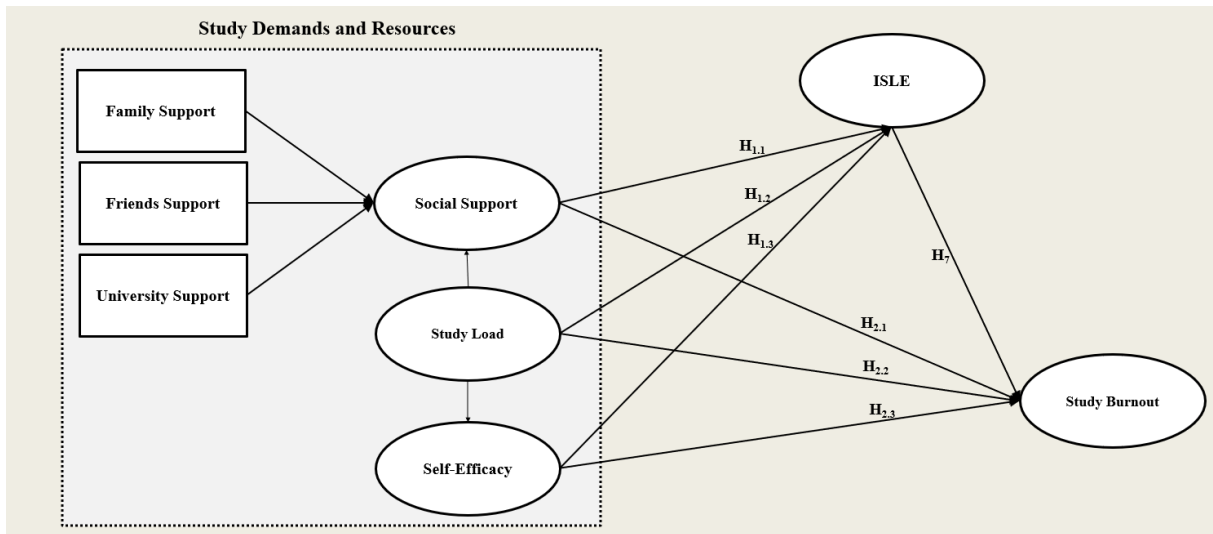
This study focuses on one key stakeholder group, the students, who have certainly not been left unharmed by the crisis (Tamrat, 2021; Shaw, 2020). During and in the aftermath of the COVID-19 crisis, students have been in a precarious situation and be severely impacted psychologically by the array of emergency actions taken by their higher education institutions and severe alterations to their university experience (Blackall, 2020; Murphy, 2020). It is essential to better understand the mechanisms causing burnout among students in the aftermath of the COVID-19 crisis and develop strategies to mitigate the risk of students falling trap to burnout. Knowledge about the latter is not only important to the context of the present pandemic but would also help in being better prepared for future pandemics. Stressful life experiences such as the COVID-19 event, has been shown to have varying psychological impacts on individuals. The concept of integration of stressful life experiences (ISLE), provides a sound theoretical basis to understand the mechanism underlying the psychological impact of events such as the COVID-19 pandemic. This study aims to contribute in building knowledge which can help us to minimize collective pain in times of crises similar to the present COVID-19 crisis, more specifically it focuses on finding ways of minimizing induced stress and burnout among higher education students.

Kurzgesagt (in a nutshell), this study aims to test a predictive model of study burnout in higher education based on the C-O-R theory and with the inclusion of the ISLE concept as a mediator. More specifically, the following research questions are addressed: (1) do resources and demands influence study burnout?; (2) do greater resources reduce loss of meaning due to COVID-19 stressful experience?; (3) does higher level of loss of meaning due to COVID-19 stressful experiences result in higher level of study burnout; (4) do resources and demands indirectly influence burnout through COVID-19 induced stress. Given that the main focus of the study is on the predictive power of the explanatory variables, we make use of the PLS-SEM technique which is best suited for predictive studies.

Results and Implications

The empirical results provide us with the following seven key findings: (1) on average students experience a relatively high level of burnout as indicated by a score 60 out of 100; (2) there is a high variation in the level of integration of the stress caused by the COVID-19 event among students, that is, some students cope much better than others; (3) the structural model results demonstrate high in-sample and out-of-sample predictive relevance; (4) only one dimension of ISLE namely, footing in the world has a significant and substantial effect on study burnout; (5) the exogenous predictors having the larger effects on study burnout are study load and self-efficacy; (6) Social support is also a significant predictor of study burnout but lecturer support should be given more attention given its much lower performance score. Those findings provide the basis for key theoretical advancements and recommendations for practice in the field.

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