

	ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER	Psychology
	INFLUENCE OF COLLEGE ADJUSTMENT ON EMOTIONAL EATING AND PERCEIVED STRESS AMONG STUDENTS	KEY WORDS: Emotional eating, perceived stress, and college adjustment
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ABSTRACT	The study examines the influence of college adjustment on emotional eating and perceived stress among students. Using a correlational research design, data were collected from 200 college students using valid measurement instruments: the Emotional Eater Questionnaire (EEQ), the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS), and the College Adjustment Test (CAT). Statistical analyses used were Pearson's correlational analysis and linear regression analysis. A moderate negative correlation was established between college adjustment and emotional eating, which shows that students with more difficulty in adjusting to college life practice more emotional eating. A high negative correlation was also established between college adjustment and perceived stress, which shows that poor adjustment correlates with high stress. A moderate positive correlation was also established between perceived stress and emotional eating, showing that high perceived stress correlates with more emotional eating behavior. Regression analysis showed that college adjustment is a good predictor of emotional eating and perceived stress. The findings highlighted the necessity of implementing university wellness programs that incorporate stress-reduction strategies, resilience-building seminars, and nutrition education to enhance college adjustment and reduce stress in turn lowering emotional eating. Further studies should consider the influence of other factors like peer connections, mentoring initiatives, and institutional support frameworks in aiding college adjustment and diminishing stress-related maladaptive actions. Also, Future studies must probe the causal mechanisms through longitudinal studies and sample generalizability to diverse populations.	
INTRODUCTION	Despite perceiving college as the most exciting time, filled with learning opportunities, new experiences, and personal development, students often face numerous challenges. Although attending college has many advantages, several difficulties lie beneath the surface of this exciting journey. These challenges, such as financial constraints and mental health issues, can impede the life-changing potential of higher education (Bay Atlantic University, 2024). College life plays a major role in transforming students' lives by offering chances for both academic and personal development. However, college students frequently encounter numerous issues that impact their physical and mental health. As students must navigate several developmental challenges, such as adjusting to a new social environment and living away from home for the first time, the transition to college is frequently stressful (Arnett, 2016). The challenges include academic pressure, social inclusiveness, financial distress, living independently, relocating from family, and becoming adjusted to a new environment. Due to these challenges, college students encounter difficulties in adjusting to their college environment, leading to stress, anxiety, and loneliness. Consequently, these emotions tend to influence their eating behaviour. Students experience stress from a variety of sources, such as deadlines for assessments, financial worries, conflicts in interpersonal relationships, and employment worries (Bojuwoye, 2002; Hudd et al., 2000). College students experience emotional eating due to stress, anxiety, and loneliness, which can potentially impact their eating habits. Thus, emotional eating refers to the extent to which emotions affect their eating behaviour and the process by which students use food as a coping mechanism to deal with the emotional challenges and stressors they face while in college. Students engage in irregular eating patterns and increase food consumption due to stress, anxiety, and emotional challenges. Alternatively, the Psychosomatic Theory of Obesity (Kaplan and Kaplan, 1957) was used to explain emotional eating. This theory postulates that people who have an emotional eating style utilize food as a dysfunctional coping mechanism to lessen stress. Moreover, they would react to stress by eating since they had not been taught to differentiate between hunger and unpleasant feelings. Perceived stress, according to Kamarck et al. (1983), is how a person interacts with their surroundings, which they see as posing a threat to them or exhausting their resources in a way that will impact their well-being. Stress is the feeling of tension and pressure. Perceived stress is characterized by a sense of unpredictability in one's life circumstances, feeling overwhelmed by daily challenges, and the feeling that one's problems are accumulating. College students experience stress adjusting to college in terms of academic demands, social pressure, personal challenges, and workload. At present, college students are likely to report having high levels of stress, which could significantly affect their emotional states and behaviours that include eating patterns. Selye's stress theory (1979) posits that a person's emotional and behavioural outcomes can be adversely impacted by excessive or persistent stress since dealing with stress consumes their psychological energy and resources. Male and female students do not appear to be affected by academic stress in the same ways. Economos et al. (2007) showed that, in contrast to male students, female students reporting high levels of academic stress tended to consume more in reaction to stress. Conversely, Mikolajczyk et al. (2009) discovered a correlation—but only in female students—between the stress of academics and the consumption of unhealthy foods. According to Shaffer (1961), adjustment is the dynamic process through which a living organism maintains a distinct gap between its needs and the external factors that influence how well those needs are met. Studying in higher education exposes students to a variety of new challenges, including academic demands, autonomy concerning their needs and activities, and more independence in learning than in their earlier education. College adjustment refers to the process by which college students adapt to the academic, social, personal, emotional, and practical challenges they encounter while they are in college. Students maintain interpersonal relationships with their peers while attempting to balance academic responsibilities with personal development. Understanding these elements is critical for creating an atmosphere that promotes the well-being and success of students. College education is intended to promote critical thinking and intellectual development. Numerous studies have shown that stressful experiences negatively impact	
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college students' well-being and academic performance. College students who feel more stressed exhibit more depressive symptoms, increased anxiety, and decreased life satisfaction (Hoyt et al., 2021; Samaha & Hawi, 2016). The college experience is diverse, with both enriching opportunities and considerable challenges. Students maintain interpersonal relationships with their peers while attempting to balance academic responsibilities with personal development. Understanding these elements is critical for creating an atmosphere that promotes the well-being and success of students.

Research Gap

Earlier research studies in India have examined different individual dimensions of college student experiences, like perceived stress, emotional eating, and college adjustment. However, an understanding of the interdependence between college adjustment and its impact on perceived stress and emotional eating is largely lacking. While research on stress and emotional eating has been investigated in solitude, very few empirical work is available regarding how the adjustment process towards college life operates to affect these variables simultaneously. This lack is further supplemented by the absence of critical investigation on the ways in which inability to adjust to college life might increase stress levels and the formation of emotional eating.

Method

The research aims to understand the relationship between emotional eating, perceived stress, and college adjustment among students. It also seeks to explore the influence of college adjustment on emotional eating and perceived stress.

Hypothesis

H01: There will be no significant relationship between college adjustment and emotional eating among college students.

H02: There will be no significant relationship between college adjustment and perceived stress among college students.

H03: There will be no significant relationship between perceived stress and emotional eating among college students.

H04: There will not be any influence of college adjustment on emotional eating among college students.

H05: There will not be any influence of college adjustment on perceived stress among college students.

Research Design

The study utilises a quantitative correlational research design, allowing for statistical analysis of relationships among variables.

Sample And Sampling

The sample for the current study comprises 200 college students between the ages of 18 and 25. The study used a convenience sampling technique, which selected participants based on their availability and willingness to participate. This method was chosen because it is practicable in assessing college students from various colleges within a limited time frame.

Inclusion And Exclusion Criteria

1. Inclusion Criteria

- I. The participant must be a full-time college student
- II. Participants must be between the age range of 18 to 25

2. Exclusion Criteria

- I. Participants who are graduated or dropped out from college
- II. Participants outside India were not considered

Procedure

At first, Google Forms were made as the data will be collected in online mode. The participants were asked whether they

wished to participate in the study or not, and their consent was taken. After that, an explanation about the nature and aim of the study was provided to the participants to establish rapport. They were assured that all information taken from them would remain confidential.

Through Google Forms, the participants were provided with the three questionnaires. Each participant was given a questionnaire that asked about their perceived stress, emotional eating, and college adjustment. After the completion of the questionnaire, the scoring of all 200 responses was done, and finally, the results were interpreted and discussed.

Tools For The Study

1. Emotional Eater Questionnaire (EEQ)

It is a 10-item scale developed to assess to what extent emotions affect eating behaviour. It consists of subscales of disinhibition, type of food, and sense of guilt. It was developed by Garaulet et al. (2012). The test-retest stability is $r = 0.70$. It has good internal consistency with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.773 and has adequate convergent validity. It is a 4-point Likert scale with responses as never, sometimes, generally, and always. Each reply is given a score of 0 to 3, from never to always. The total EEQ score ranges from 0 to 30.

2. The Perceived Stress Scale (PSS)

PSS-10 is developed initially by Cohen et al. (1983) and is commonly used to measure stress levels in adolescents and adults twelve years and older. It has ten items that use a 5-point Likert scale (0 – never, 1 – almost never, 2 – sometimes, 3 – fairly often, 4 – very often) to assess how much a person has discerned life as unpredictable, uncontrollable, and overloading over the previous month. Internal consistency reliability for the PSS-10 scores is good, with Cronbach's $\alpha = .82$ and adequate convergent validity. The total PSS score ranges from 0 to 40.

3. The College Adjustment Test Scale (CAT)

The questionnaire consists of 19 items with subscales of positive affect, negative affect, and homesickness. The scale is used to assess coping with college adjustment. It is a 7-point Likert scale ranging from not at all to a great deal. The scale was developed by Pennebaker, J.W., in 1990, with Cronbach's alpha typically reported as 0.79.

Statistical Technique Used for Data Analysis

The analysis was done using JAMOV software. The statistical techniques used for the data analysis in this study were correlation analysis and regression analysis. Correlation analysis was used to find the relationship between College adjustment, Emotional Eating, and perceived stress. In contrast, Linear regression Analysis was conducted to determine the influence of College adjustment on Emotional Eating and perceived stress.

Research Ethics

Research participants were provided with necessary information regarding the purpose of the study, and informed consent was obtained. The participants' confidentiality was ensured.

RESULTS

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics

	Emotional Eating	Perceived Stress	College Adjustment
N	200	200	200
Mean	15.7	20.7	71.3
Standard deviation	6.49	5.23	15.2

The table comprises the mean, median, and standard deviation of 200 participants for the variables Emotional Eating, Perceived Stress, and College adjustment. The mean score of Emotional Eating (15.7) and a standard deviation of

6.49 imply varying tendencies towards emotional eating behaviour in response to stress. Similarly, the mean score of Perceived Stress (20.7) and its standard deviation (5.23) indicate that students experienced a moderate level of stress. The mean value of college adjustment (71.3) and the standard deviation score of 4.33 indicate a moderate level of adjustment among students.

Table 2

Correlation Matrix				
		Emotional Eating	Perceived Stress	College Adjustment
Emotional Eating	Pearson's r	—		
	df	—		
	p-value	—		
Perceived Stress	Pearson's r	0.478***	—	
	df	200	—	
	p-value	< .001	—	
College Adjustment	Pearson's r	-0.528***	-0.600***	—
	df	200	200	—
	p-value	<.001	<0.001	—

Note. * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001

The correlation between College Adjustment and Emotional Eating ($r = -0.528$, $p < .001$) depicts a negative moderate relationship. This shows that students with greater difficulty in adjusting to college life may be more likely to engage in emotional eating; that is, when college adjustment decreases, emotional eating increases. The correlation coefficient for college adjustment and emotional eating is $r = -0.528$, and the p-value is < 0.001 , indicating a highly significant negative correlation. Hence, the null hypothesis that there will be no significant relationship between college adjustment and emotional eating among college students is rejected.

The correlation value ($r = -0.600$, $p < .001$) indicates a strong negative correlation between college adjustment and perceived stress. This suggests that students facing greater difficulty adjusting to college life tend to experience higher levels of perceived stress; that is, when college adjustment decreases, perceived stress increases. The correlation coefficient for college adjustment and perceived stress is $r = -0.600$, and the p-value is < 0.001 , indicating a highly significant negative correlation. Hence, the null hypothesis that there will be no significant relationship between college adjustment and perceived stress among college students is rejected.

The correlation between Perceived Stress and Emotional Eating ($r = 0.478$, $p = <.001$) shows a moderate positive relationship, this shows that higher levels of perceived stress are associated with increased emotional eating behaviours. This depicts that students who experience greater stress levels are more likely to engage in emotional eating. The correlation coefficient for college adjustment and emotional eating is $r = -0.478$, and the p-value is < 0.001 , indicating a highly significant positive correlation. Hence, the null hypothesis that there will be no significant relationship between perceived stress and emotional eating among college students is rejected.

Table 3

Linear Regression: Model Fit Measures				
Model	R	R ²	Adjusted R ²	
1	0.528	0.278	0.275	

Note. Models estimated using a sample size of N=200

Model Coefficients - Emotional eating				
Predictor	Estimate	SE	t	p
Intercept	31.6841	8.63517	0.00	< .001
College Adjustment	-0.2250	0.0256	-8.79	< .001

The linear regression analysis suggests that higher levels of

college adjustment are associated with lower levels of emotional eating, as shown by a regression coefficient for college adjustment ($B = -0.225$, $SE = 0.0256$, $t = -8.79$, $p < .001$). The model shows a moderate correlation between the independent variable, college adjustment, and the dependent variable, emotional eating, as indicated by the correlation coefficient ($R = 0.528$). The coefficient of determination ($R^2 = 0.278$), however, indicates that approximately 27.8% of the variance in the dependent variable, emotional eating, is accounted for by the independent variable, college adjustment. Moreover, the adjusted $R^2 = 0.275$ enhances the generalizability of the model to populations similar to the one under study.

Table 4:

Linear Regression: Model Fit Measures				
Model	R	R ²	Adjusted R ²	
1	0.600	0.360	0.356	

Note. Models estimated using a sample size of N=200

Model Coefficients - Perceived stress				
Predictor	Estimate	SE	t	p
Intercept	35.389	1.4147	25.0	< .001
College Adjustment	-0.206	0.0194	-10.6	< .001

The linear regression analysis suggests that higher levels of college adjustment are associated with lower levels of perceived stress, as shown by a regression coefficient for college adjustment ($B = -0.206$, $SE = 0.0194$, $t = -10.6$, $p < .001$). The model shows a strong correlation between the independent variable (college adjustment) and the dependent variable (perceived stress), as indicated by the correlation coefficient ($R = 0.600$). The coefficient of determination ($R^2 = 0.360$), however, indicates that approximately 36% of the variance in the dependent variable (perceived stress) is accounted for by the independent variable (college adjustment). Moreover, the adjusted $R^2 = 0.356$ enhances the generalizability of the model to populations similar to the one under study.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of the study was to evaluate the relationship and influence of college adjustment on emotional eating and perceived stress. It was found that there was a moderate negative correlation between adjustment to college and emotional eating behaviour. This reveals that as the ability of the students to fit into the college environment decreases, there is an increased tendency to use food to cope with emotional problems. Some of the factors that contribute to the relationship between poor college adjustment and increased emotional eating might include social isolation; that is, the inability to make social connections can lead to feelings of loneliness and isolation, and students might find difficulty in adjusting to college, and then food becomes the only source of comfort. The second factor might be stress and coping mechanisms; that is, students facing adjustment difficulties often experience elevated stress levels, so they may engage in emotional eating to tolerate selected

Similarly, the study found a perfect negative relationship between college adjustment and levels of perceived stress. This means that students who face difficulty adjusting to college life are most likely to have high levels of perceived stress. One of the supporting studies includes the study conducted by Madson et al. (2022) on "Self-Efficacy, Perceived Stress, and Individual Adjustment among College-Attending Emerging Adults", which discovered that self-efficacy has a direct correlation with adjustment and an indirect relationship with reduced stress. The study aligns with the transactional model of stress, which states that stress occurs as a result of an individual's evaluation of his or her ability to manage environmental demands. The factors leading to decreased college adjustment include academic stress, social integration difficulty, and personal traits such as low self-efficacy, all of which can disrupt effective coping

mechanisms and increase stress.

The study shows a positive moderate relationship between perceived stress and emotional eating. This depicts that students who experience greater stress levels are more likely to engage in emotional eating. The findings are similar to the results of the study conducted by Mason et al. (2023) on "Emotional Eating in College Students: Associations with Coping and Perceived Stress." This study reveals that higher perceived stress levels were significantly associated with increased emotional eating behaviours that provide short-term relief but may have long-term negative consequences. College students typically face stressful experiences and thus use emotional eating as a coping strategy. This maladaptive coping mechanism brings temporary relief from negative feelings; however, it could have potentially harmful long-term effects. Several factors, such as maladaptive coping styles, diet, school pressure, performance anxiety, environmental pressures, and social pressures, contribute to this association. Students turn to food for comfort because of unrealistic expectations, school pressures, and social pressure. The Escape Theory states that emotional eating is a maladaptive coping mechanism that is comforting immediately but potentially has harmful long-term effects.

The linear regression analysis indicates a significant negative correlation between college adjustment and emotional eating. The model accounts for 27.8% of the variance in emotional eating. This implies that many other variables, such as stress levels, coping mechanisms (e.g., avoidance coping), and deficits in self-regulation, most likely have mediating roles. Cross-cultural and longitudinal processes need to be the target of future research to understand these processes better.

Similarly, linear regression analysis shows a high negative correlation between college adjustment and perceived stress levels. The model shows that 36% of the variance in perceived stress is explained by college adjustment, and it is a significant predictor of stress reduction. These results are consistent with previous research highlighting the significance of developing college adjustment to reduce stress and enhance student well-being. There are other variables, such as coping and social support, that are also likely to affect perceived stress. Future research would be well-advised to investigate other variables such as self-compassion and perceived control, to clarify these relationships further.

CONCLUSION

Implication Of The Research

The findings from the study have significant implications in comprehending and addressing the relationship between college adjustment, emotional eating, and perceived stress in college students. The study concludes the negative correlation between perceived stress and college adjustment in students. Generally, students who experience a hard time adjusting to college life are likely to have high levels of stress. Colleges need to implement supportive campuses, such as orientation, peer mentoring, and counseling services, to help facilitate smooth transitions. Emotional eating is a common coping mechanism among students with adjustment problems to college life. Stress reduction should be a secondary therapeutic intervention goal, along with better coping skills like physical exercise, emotional regulation skills, and mindfulness training. University wellness programs should incorporate stress-reduction strategies, resilience-based workshops, and nutrition education. Colleges must implement academic support services on campus that integrate academic goals with student wellness. Sleep hygiene education should be part of student health programs. In conclusion, active interventions should be used to reduce stress, promote healthy college adjustment, and prevent maladaptive behaviour, thereby cultivating a

healthier and more resilient student population.

Limitations

The study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the social desirability bias may be introduced by using self-report measures like the PSS, EEQ, and CAT, as participants' societal evaluation leads them to rank their perceived stress, emotional eating, and college adjustment higher or lower. Second, as the sample size is 200, generalization could not be done. Third, the use of a cross-sectional research design may not effectively establish causal relationships between perceived stress, Emotional eating, and College Adjustment. Finally, the results cannot be applied to other age groups or professional contexts because the sample was restricted to college students. Additionally, the study did not take into consideration the potential confounding variables such as personality traits, pre-existing mental health issues, socioeconomic status, and family support that could affect the relationship between perceived stress, emotional eating, and college adjustment.

Directions For Further Research

Further research should consider the influence of other factors like peer connections, mentoring initiatives, and institutional support frameworks in aiding college adjustment and diminishing stress-related maladaptive actions. Also, a more thorough evaluation and a larger sample can be made available. Additionally, Future studies need to examine the gender differences, that is, how men and women experience stress, turn to food when they are emotional, and adjust to life in college. By understanding these differences, researchers can create programs tailored specifically for men or women. These programs will help them manage stress better by using strategies that work best for each gender. Further research on the influence of college adjustment on emotional eating and perceived stress should prioritize longitudinal studies to establish causal relationships over time.

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