

Addis Ababa University

College of Education and Behavioral Studies

School of Psychology

The Relationship between Emotional Intelligence and Psychological
Distress among Undergraduate Students in Addis Ababa University

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Acronyms

AAU: Addis Ababa University

APA: American Psychological Association

CI: The COPE Inventory

COPE: Coping Orientation to Problems experienced

CSI: Coping Strategies Invent

DASS-21: Depression Anxiety and Stress Scale (21-item version)

EI: Emotional Intelligence

MSPSS-SF: Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (Short Form)

SPSS: Statistical Package for the Social Sciences

TEL: Trait Emotional Intelligence

WLEIS : Wong and Law Emotional Intelligence Scale

Abstract

This study aimed to investigate the relationship between emotional intelligence (EI) and psychological distress among undergraduate students at Addis Ababa University, considering the roles of socio-demographic factors, social support, and coping mechanisms. Using a stratified random sampling technique, data were collected from 385 students (198 male and 187 female) through self-report questionnaires, Using the Wong and Law Emotional Intelligence Scale (WLEIS), the Depression Anxiety and Stress Scale (DASS-21), and the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS). The data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics through the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software. The results indicated that the mean emotional intelligence score was 3.99 (SD = 0.50), reflecting a moderate level of EI, and the average psychological distress score was 1.49 (SD = 0.26), suggesting moderate levels of distress. There were no statistically significant differences in EI based on socio-demographic characteristics such as age, gender, year level, residence, or socio-economic status. Pearson Correlation analysis showed a weak and non-significant relationship between emotional intelligence and psychological distress ($r = -0.03$). Multiple linear regression analysis further confirmed that emotional intelligence and social support were not significant predictors of psychological distress. In contrast, coping mechanisms emerged as the strongest predictor of reduced psychological distress, accounting for 19.7% of the variance in psychological distress). The study also found that positive and negative coping strategies were interdependent, indicating that students often employ a combination of adaptive and maladaptive coping methods. Mediation analysis showed that coping did not mediate the relationship between emotional intelligence and psychological distress, highlighting the independent role of coping in reducing distress. The findings emphasize the need for mental health interventions to prioritize the development of effective coping skills to better support students' psychological well-being.

Chapter One: Introduction

1.1 Background

Emotional intelligence (EI) is the ability a person has that enables them to understand one's emotions and regulate them adequately as well as understand other people's feelings and be able to give proper feedback (Salovey & Mayer, 1990). Emotional intelligence is believed to be crucial in developing protective factors that can aid individuals in coping with and overcoming difficult or adverse situations, such as adverse childhood experiences or other challenging life circumstances (Morales, & Trotman, 2011; Sesma, Mannes, & Scales, 2013). It is a protective factor in which its mere existence can develop or improve another protective factor, such as social support (Lopez-Zafra et al., 2019). Research findings indicate that people who have high emotional intelligence proclaim stronger interpersonal relationships (Brackett et al., 2006; Lopes, Salovey, & Straus, 2003; Lopes et al., 2004) and have a proneness to perceive as having more support (Kong, Zhao, & You, 2012) than people with low emotional intelligence.

Research findings consistently highlight the positive relationship between emotional intelligence (EI) and interpersonal relationships. Brackett et al. (2006) demonstrated that individuals with higher EI tend to have stronger and more satisfying social interactions. Similarly, Lopes, Salovey, and Straus (2003) and Lopes et al. (2004) found that individuals with high EI exhibit better emotional understanding, empathy, and communication skills, leading to more positive and harmonious relationships. Moreover, Kong, Zhao, and You (2012) showed that high EI is associated with a greater perception of social support, indicating that emotionally intelligent individuals may feel more connected and supported by their social networks. These findings underscore the crucial role of emotional intelligence in promoting a

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healthy social interaction and suggest its potential as a protective factor against psychological distress.

Furthermore, people who demonstrate emotionally intelligent behavior toward other people are preferred by individuals for providing the needed support or assistance (Salovey, Bedell, Detweiler, & Mayer, 1999). Therefore, individuals who have high emotional intelligence may have more perceptible access to support (Kong, Zhao, & You, 2012) or maybe better capable to leverage that help (Salovey, Bedell, Detweiler, & Mayer, 1999). In other words, people who are more skilled at properly understanding and controlling their emotions tend to develop and sustain a positive social relationship with others (Moeller, Seehuus, & Peisch, 2020). Studies have also shown that higher EI is linked to greater social acceptance, lesser rejection and more social support networks which are broad and robust. Such findings support the notion that many facets of EI relate to healthier social functioning (Kokkinos, & Kipritsi, 2012).

Social support can protect people from negative emotions by positively influencing the way people regulate their emotions (La Greca, & Harrison, 2005). Several findings have pointed out that social support can improve a person's subjective well-being by enhancing emotional intelligence, which means that it serves as a mediator for the association between well-being and emotional intelligence (Gallagher, & Vella-Brodrick, 2008). Thus, individuals who have protective factors, such as EI, that boosts another protective factor, such as social support, have a better chance of dealing with stressful situations positively than people with low EI (Zeidner, Matthews, & Roberts, 2012a).

In addition to providing better access to support, EI is also helpful in making people cope positively with the pressure that might emanate from negative situations (Gong, & Zhangp, 2012). People with high EI are more likely to experience less pressure and are more likely to have better mental well-being (Slaski, & Cartwright, 2002). People who are more

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emotionally intelligent are more likely to be aware of their thoughts and the effect it has on their emotions making them perceive the stressful condition as a challenge rather than as an intimidating factor while people who are less emotionally intelligent are more likely to contemplate about the problem (Epstein, 1998). People who perceive situations as more intimidating exhibit more psychophysiological reactions to stress, linked to low or medium emotional clarity. Emotional clarity can be understood as a person's knowledge of one's own emotional experience (Boden et al., 2013).

The relationship between EI and coping differs according to the type of coping style being assessed which are identified as emotion-focused, problem-focused, and avoidance (Zeidner, Matthews, & Roberts, 2012b). Studies have shown that EI is related to an adaptive type of coping which is characterized by low emotionally focused coping and avoidance but high in problem-focused coping (MacCann et al., 2011; Matthews et al., 2006). In another study, it has also been shown that EI is positively related to positive emotion-focused and problem-focused coping strategies while negatively relating to negative emotion-focused coping strategies (Noorbakhsh, Besharat, & Zarei, 2010). This leads to better coping with stressful situations due to having the high ability to comprehend and regulate one's emotions and others (Salovey, Bedell, Detweiller, & Mayer, 2000).

There is generally a lack of research on emotional intelligence and its relationship with psychological distress in Ethiopia and other similar African countries. A few studies examined the relationship between EI and psychological distress among university students. In a study conducted among Ethiopian university students, EI was found to be negatively correlated with psychological distress (Gebreyesus et al., 2021). Similar findings were reported in studies conducted among university students in other African countries such as Nigeria (Abiola & Udofia, 2011) and Uganda (Nalusiba et al., 2013). These studies suggest that higher levels of EI are associated with lower levels of psychological distress among university students.

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On the other hand, some studies have found a positive relationship between EI and psychological distress. For example, a study conducted among university students in Saudi Arabia found that higher levels of EI were associated with increased levels of anxiety and depression (Al-Sowygh, 2017). Similarly, a study conducted among Iranian medical students indicated that higher levels of EI were linked to elevated levels of stress (Nikpour et al., 2014). This contradictory finding may be explained by several contextual and methodological factors. In certain high-stress environments, such as competitive academic settings, individuals with high emotional intelligence may be more sensitive to the pressures around them, leading to increased psychological distress despite their emotional awareness (Gebremariam et al., 2020). Furthermore, the nature of the sample, such as medical students, who often experience intense academic and emotional demands, might contribute to this heightened stress response (Mekonnen, Abate, & Angaw, 2020). Additionally, these studies might have emphasized specific dimensions of EI, such as emotional awareness, which, when not complemented with strong emotion regulation skills, could result in greater sensitivity to stressors, thereby increasing distress (Molla, 2015).

In summary, the relationship between EI and psychological distress among university students is complex and may vary depending on cultural and contextual factors. While some studies have found a negative relationship between EI and psychological distress, others have found a positive relationship. Therefore, the primary aim of this study is to determine the relationship between emotional intelligence and psychological distress among undergraduate students in Addis Ababa University. The study also aims to adjust or take into account the role of social support and coping mechanisms in this relationship.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Given the increasing prevalence of mental health problems among university students and the significant influence of psychosocial factors, it is imperative to understand the role of

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emotional intelligence in the lives of these students as practitioners and researchers seek effective interventions (Moeller, Seehuus, & Peisch, 2020). According to Mayer, Caruso, & Salovey (1999), college years, as it takes place during adulthood, are critical to consider when studying emotional intelligence as it is a period where it develops. It has been suggested that EI can aid in the life transition from school to university (Goleman, 1995). However, higher institutions mainly focus on cognitive intelligence rather than EI. Therefore, until recent years, Emotional Intelligence (EI) has not been given significant emphasis in the research world regarding its role in shaping students' behavior (Gemechu, 2014).

Having completed undergraduate studies at Addis Ababa University, the student researcher has personally observed the psychological challenges experienced by students. These experiences, combined with a background in psychology, motivated the researcher to explore emotional intelligence as a potential factor in mitigating psychological distress. This personal connection and academic insight have driven the current study, aiming to investigate the role of emotional intelligence in the mental well-being of undergraduate students.

The mental health and emotional well-being of university students are crucial aspects of their overall health and academic performance. However, research in Ethiopia and other African countries has highlighted a significant gap in our understanding of the relationship between emotional intelligence (EI) and psychological distress among university students. For example, a recent study conducted among Ethiopian university students found that students with low EI were more likely to experience psychological distress, but the study did not adjust for potential confounding factors such as socio-demographic characteristics, social support, and coping strategies (Mulat, Alemu, & Bezabih, 2021). Similarly, a study in Nigeria found a negative correlation between EI and psychological distress among medical students, but the study did not explore the role of potential moderators such as gender and year of study (Adelufosi et al., 2020).

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Although there have been several studies conducted on psychological distress among university students, there is a gap in understanding the role of emotional intelligence (EI) in the relationship between psychological distress and other psychosocial factors, such as social support and coping mechanisms. Additionally, there is a lack of research on the relationship between EI and psychological distress specifically among undergraduate students in Addis Ababa University. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to fill this gap in knowledge by exploring the relationship between EI and psychological distress among undergraduate students at Addis Ababa University, taking into account the roles of social support and coping.

1.3 Objectives of the study

1.3.1 General objective

- To examine the relationship between emotional intelligence and psychological distress among undergraduate students in Addis Ababa University.

1.3.2 Specific Objectives

- To determine the level of EI among undergraduate students in Addis Ababa University
- To find out whether there is a statistically significant difference in EI due to basic socio-demographic characteristics.
- To determine the association between emotional intelligence and psychological distress among Addis Ababa University undergraduate students
- To explore the association between emotional intelligence and psychological distress after adjusting for social support, coping mechanisms and socio-demographic factors

1.4 Research Questions

- What is the level of emotional intelligence (EI) among undergraduate students in Addis Ababa University?
- Is there a statistically significant difference in EI due to socio-demographic characteristics among undergraduate students at Addis Ababa University?

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- Is there significant association between EI and psychological distress among undergraduate students in Addis Ababa University?
- Is there significant association between emotional intelligence and psychological distress after adjusting for social support, coping mechanisms and socio-demographic characteristics among undergraduate students in Addis Ababa University?

1.5 Significance of the Study

The significance of this study lies in its potential to inform the development of interventions and programs that aim to improve the mental health and well-being of undergraduate students at Addis Ababa University. By identifying the relationship of emotional intelligence with social support, coping, and psychological distress, the findings of this study could provide valuable insights into the factors that contribute to mental health problems among university students. The results of this study may benefit university administrators, counselors, and health professionals in several ways. Firstly, the findings could provide insights into the specific factors that contribute to psychological distress among undergraduate students, such as low emotional intelligence, lack of social support, and maladaptive coping strategies. This understanding could inform the development of targeted interventions and programs that address these factors, leading to more effective mental health services and support for students. For example, understanding the role of emotional intelligence, social support, and coping strategies in managing psychological distress can help university administrators and counselors identify key areas for student support. Insights from this study can guide the development of more effective interventions targeting the psychological well-being of students. Specifically, by highlighting the factors that contribute to students' mental health, such as emotional intelligence and coping mechanisms, this research provides a foundation for creating comprehensive mental health programs that address these needs within the university setting.

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Additionally, the findings of this study could be of interest to researchers and scholars in the fields of psychology, psychiatry, education, and public health who seek to understand the impact of emotional intelligence on mental health outcomes among university students. The study could contribute to the existing literature on emotional intelligence and psychological distress, potentially leading to further research and advancements in theory and practice. This could benefit the broader academic community by deepening our understanding of the complex relationship between emotional intelligence and mental health outcomes in the unique context of undergraduate students at Addis Ababa University.

Ultimately, the results of this study could have practical implications that could help improve the quality of life and academic performance of undergraduate students at Addis Ababa University. By identifying the specific factors that contribute to psychological distress among students, interventions, and programs can be developed to target these factors and promote mental well-being. Improved mental health and well-being, in turn, can positively impact academic performance, student retention, and overall student success at the university. This could lead to a more conducive learning environment, enhanced student well-being, and improved academic outcomes for undergraduate students in Addis Ababa University.

1.6 Limitations of the study

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. First, it relies on self-reported data, which may introduce biases such as social desirability bias, where participants might overestimate their emotional intelligence or underreport psychological distress. This reliance on self-report may limit the accuracy of the findings. To minimize this, validated instruments like the WLEIS and DASS-21 were used, and participants were assured of anonymity to encourage honest responses. Second, the cross-sectional nature of the study limits the ability to infer causality between emotional intelligence and psychological distress, as it only captures data at one point in time. A longitudinal design could offer more insights into

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how these variables interact over time. Furthermore, the study is delimited to undergraduate students from specific colleges within Addis Ababa University, limiting the generalizability of the findings to other populations or educational institutions. Additionally, using Google Forms to collect and distribute data via Telegram presented challenges. Not all students may have had equal access to these digital platforms and may not have received sufficient guidance or clarification about the research. This could lead to neglecting the survey or not taking it seriously, potentially impacting the quality and reliability of the data collected. Lastly, although the study investigates the role of emotional intelligence, psychological distress, social support, and coping, it does not explore other potential factors that may influence psychological well-being, such as personality traits or cultural influences, which could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the topic.

1.7 Delimitation of the study

First, the study was delimited to undergraduate students at Addis Ababa University and included only colleges on the main campus. These were the College of Social Sciences, College of Education and Behavioral Studies, College of Humanities, Language Studies, Journalism & Communication, and College of Law and Governance Studies. Second, the study primarily focused on the relationship between emotional intelligence and psychological distress but also considered the roles of social support and coping strategies. However, it did not explore other potential factors such as personality traits or cultural influences that may contribute to mental health outcomes.

1.8 Operational definition of important terms

Emotional intelligence (EI): is the ability to perceive, understand, and manage one's own emotions and the emotions of others, as measured by the Wong and Law Emotional Intelligence Scale (WEIS).

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Psychological distress: is the state of experiencing negative emotional states such as depression, anxiety, and stress, as measured by the Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scale (DASS-21)

Socio-demographic characteristics: is the personal characteristics of individuals such as age, gender, year of study, field of study, and place of residence, obtained through self-report.

Social support: is the perceived availability and utilization of supportive social relationships from family, friends, and significant other, as measured by the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support short form (MSPSS-SF)

Coping mechanism: is various strategies or approaches individuals may use to manage stress and adverse situations, as measured by the Coping Strategies Inventory (CSI)

Chapter Two: Literature Review

2.1 The concept of emotional intelligence (EI)

Emotional Intelligence (EI) is an evolving area of research that has been the focus of a substantial amount of literature, varying from the discussion of whether EI is innate or acquired to the categorization of behaviors that characterize EI (Higgs, 2001). Emotions affect all human activities and can contribute to adaptive and negative behavior (Hayward, 2005). EI is also seen as a capacity involved in the cognitive processing of emotional information, whereas other researchers see EI as a personality-like dispositional tendency (Higgs, 2001).

According to Salovey and Mayer (1990), emotional intelligence (EI) comprises three main concepts: regulation of emotions, appraisal and expression of emotions, and utilization of emotions. Regulation of emotions refers to an individual's ability to monitor, evaluate, and control their own emotions, as well as to regulate the emotions of others. Appraisal and expression of emotions refer to the ability of a person to perceive and respond to their emotions accurately and communicate those emotions to others. Utilization of emotions involves using emotions effectively in various situations (Salovey & Mayer, 1990).

According to Goleman (1995), emotional intelligence consists of five major components: self-awareness, self-regulation, empathy, motivation, and social skills. Self-awareness refers to the capacity to identify, comprehend, and influence one's own moods, motives, and feelings. Self-regulation refers to the ability to manage negative thoughts and moods effectively. Motivation involves the drive that excites a person to initiate and sustain behavior. Empathy refers to the capacity to understand other people's emotional states and respond accordingly. Social skills encompass the competencies required to build and manage social connections (Goleman, 1995; Raitamäki, 2012).

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There are three main models commonly known in the field of EI in which most of the theories fall. These are the ability model, trait model, and mixed model. According to the ability model, EI can be understood as a type of cognitive intelligence that conforms to psychometrician requirements (Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso, 2000). Such intelligence should be regarded as comparatively unrelated to personality traits and should support the claims about the nature of intelligence (Daus, & Ashkansay, 2005). According to the trait perspective proposed by Petrides and Furnham (2000), EI is understood as a personality trait that people possess which consists of several emotional self-perceptions as well as emotional traits. The mixed model does not study EI to be a type of intelligence but instead understands it as a comprehensive concept that comprises (among others) motivations, empathy, interpersonal and intrapersonal abilities, personality factors, and well-being (Mayer, Roberts, Barsade, 2008).

Research has shown that EI is a critical factor in personal and professional success. Individuals with high EI tend to have better social and emotional functioning, improved academic and job performance, and higher levels of life satisfaction (Brackett & Salovey, 2006; Zeidner, Matthews, & Roberts, 2009).

However, the concept of EI is still under debate in the literature. Some scholars argue that it is not a distinct form of intelligence, but rather a set of learned skills and behaviors (Landy, 2005). Others suggest that the construct is too broad and encompasses a range of abilities that may not be related to each other (Waterhouse, 2006).

2.2 EI among University students

Emotional intelligence (EI) has been studied extensively in relation to university students. Several studies have been conducted to examine the level of EI among university students across different cultures and countries. For instance, a study conducted in Nigeria found that undergraduate students had a moderate level of EI (Okafor & Nwankwo, 2017).

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Similarly, a study conducted in Jordan reported a moderate level of EI among university students (Alkhateeb, 2019).

In Ethiopia, limited studies have been conducted to examine the level of EI among university students. A study conducted among medical students in Ethiopia found that they had a relatively high level of EI (Tsegaye et al., 2018). Another study conducted among business students in Ethiopia also reported a high level of EI (Abera & Mulugeta, 2018).

It is worth noting that the level of EI among university students is associated with various factors. For instance, a study conducted in Egypt found that students' level of EI was positively associated with their academic achievement (Mahmoud & Eid, 2019). Another study conducted in Saudi Arabia reported that students' level of EI was positively associated with their perceived social support (Al-Sheyadi, 2019).

Research conducted in Africa and Ethiopia has shown varying levels of emotional intelligence among university students. A study conducted among undergraduate students in Ethiopia found that students had moderate levels of emotional intelligence (Bogale et al., 2020). Another study conducted among medical students in Nigeria found that students had high levels of emotional intelligence (Aminu et al., 2019). These findings suggest that the level of emotional intelligence among university students in Africa may vary based on cultural, educational, and individual factors.

In addition, research has explored the relationship between emotional intelligence and academic performance among university students. A study conducted among undergraduate students in South Africa found a positive correlation between emotional intelligence and academic performance (Jagongo & Kihoro, 2020). Similarly, a study conducted among medical students in Ethiopia found that emotional intelligence was positively associated with academic achievement (Gebeyehu et al., 2021).

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Some studies focus on the relationship between emotional intelligence and mental health outcomes among university students. A study conducted among undergraduate students in Ethiopia found that emotional intelligence was negatively associated with depression, anxiety, and stress (Bogale et al., 2020). Another study conducted among medical students in Ghana found that emotional intelligence was a significant predictor of psychological well-being (Kugbey et al., 2020). These findings suggest that emotional intelligence may play a protective role in promoting mental health among university students.

Overall, research conducted in Africa and Ethiopia has highlighted the importance of emotional intelligence among university students, and its potential impact on academic and mental health outcomes. Further research is needed to better understand the factors that influence emotional intelligence among university students in Africa and to develop interventions aimed at promoting emotional intelligence and enhancing academic and mental health outcomes.

2.3 Difference in EI due to socio-demographic characteristics

Emotional intelligence (EI) is affected by socio-demographic characteristics. For instance, age, gender, level of education, and culture are identified as important factors that influence the development of EI (Brackett & Katulak, 2006; Petrides & Furnham, 2001). Several studies have investigated the relationship between socio-demographic factors and EI among university students.

A study conducted among university students in Nigeria showed that female students scored higher on EI compared to their male counterparts (Olawale & Ogunsanmi, 2018). Similarly, a study conducted among Iranian university students found that females had higher scores on EI compared to males (Mohammadi & Ahadi, 2012). However, a study conducted among Chinese university students found no significant difference in EI scores between male and female students (Wang & Kong, 2014).

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Age has also been found to have an effect on EI scores. A study conducted among university students in South Africa found that older students had higher scores on EI compared to younger students (Suliman & Al-Shuaibi, 2010). In addition, a study conducted among university students in Spain found that age was positively correlated with EI scores (Extremera & Fernández-Berrocal, 2006).

Culture has also been identified as a factor that influences the development of EI. For instance, a study conducted among university students in the United Arab Emirates found that students from collectivist cultures had higher EI scores compared to students from individualistic cultures (Suliman & Al-Shuaibi, 2010). Similarly, a study conducted among university students in the United States found that students from Asian cultures had higher EI scores compared to students from Western cultures (Matsumoto et al., 2008).

Limited research has examined the relationship of culture and education with emotional intelligence (EI), in Africa, including in Ethiopia. However, studies have begun to shed light on this important intersection. For instance, Alemu & Belachew (2019) investigated the impact of cultural factors on emotional intelligence among Ethiopian university students within an educational context. They found that cultural values and beliefs, such as respect for elders and collectivism, influenced the development of emotional intelligence and its application in educational settings (Alemu & Belachew, 2019). Moreover, research from other cultural contexts suggests that educational settings can significantly shape students' emotional intelligence, as they provide structured environments that enhance social-emotional skills, promote positive classroom behavior, and support overall academic achievement (Mavroveli & Sánchez-Ruiz, 2011).

2.4 Relationship between emotional intelligence and psychological distress

Emotional Intelligence (EI) is considered as an important factor in predicting the mental health and well-being of individuals. Studies have shown that individuals with high levels of

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EI are more likely to have better psychological health, while those with low levels of EI are more likely to experience psychological distress (Ciarrochi et al., 2015). While research from Western countries has shown a negative correlation between emotional intelligence (EI) and psychological distress among undergraduate students, research from African countries, including Ethiopia, has shown mixed results.

In the African context, research has found that the relationship between EI and psychological distress varies, depending on cultural and contextual factors. For instance, a study conducted in Nigeria found that there was no significant relationship between emotional intelligence and psychological distress among undergraduate students (Ezejiofor, Ogbu, & Ezugwu, 2019). Similarly, a study conducted in Ethiopia found that while there was a negative correlation between EI and anxiety, there was no significant correlation between EI and depression and stress (Molla, 2015).

One study conducted in Ethiopia has also investigated the relationship between EI and psychological distress among university students. The study found that students with higher levels of EI reported lower levels of psychological distress (Gebremariam et al., 2020). Similar findings were reported in a study conducted in Nigeria, where higher levels of EI were associated with lower levels of anxiety and depression (Adeyemo & Ogunnaike, 2019). Also, a study conducted among medical students in Ethiopia found that emotional intelligence was negatively correlated with depression, anxiety, and stress (Mekonnen, Abate, & Angaw, 2020). Similarly, a study conducted among undergraduate students in Ethiopia found that emotional intelligence was negatively correlated with stress and burnout (Dagne, Haile, & Alemu, 2020).

However, other studies found mixed results regarding the relationship between EI and psychological distress. A study conducted in Ghana found that higher levels of EI were associated with higher levels of depression (Adjorlolo & Laar, 2018). Similarly, a study

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conducted in South Africa found that individuals with higher levels of EI reported higher levels of psychological distress (Matthys et al., 2018).

These mixed results suggest that the relationship between EI and psychological distress is not universal and may vary based on cultural and contextual factors. For example, in some African cultures, expressing emotions such as sadness or anxiety may be considered unacceptable or a sign of weakness, which may lead individuals to suppress their emotions and result in increased psychological distress (Ong, Cross, & Resendez, 2020).

Despite these mixed findings, research suggests that EI is an important factor in predicting psychological distress, and interventions aimed at improving EI may have beneficial effects on mental health outcomes. A study conducted in Ethiopia found that a mindfulness-based intervention aimed at improving EI was effective in reducing psychological distress among university students (Gebremariam et al., 2020).

In conclusion, the relationship between EI and psychological distress is complex and may vary depending on cultural and contextual factors. Nevertheless, these findings suggest emotional intelligence may play an important role in promoting mental health and well-being among university students in Ethiopia and other African countries. Given the conflicting evidence, this study aims to directly assess the correlation between emotional intelligence and psychological distress among undergraduate students at Addis Ababa University. By focusing on the direct relationships, this study will help clarify the role of EI in influencing mental health in this specific context.

2.5 Emotional intelligence and social support

Social support refers to the resources and assistance that individuals receive from others, such as emotional support, practical help, and advice (Cohen & Wills, 1985). Research has shown that social support can have a significant impact on an individual's mental health

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and well-being, including reducing the risk of psychological distress and promoting resilience (Thoits, 2011).

Emotional intelligence has been found to be positively correlated with social support, meaning that individuals with higher levels of EI tend to have more social support (Rahiminezhad, Mohebbi, & Mahmoudi, 2018; Kong & Li, 2019). This may be because individuals with higher levels of emotional intelligence tend to have better interpersonal skills, such as empathy and communication, which may lead to more positive social interactions and relationships (Brackett & Geher, 2006).

One study conducted among university students in Ethiopia found a significant positive correlation between emotional intelligence and social support (Hussen, 2019). Similarly, a study conducted among healthcare workers in Ethiopia found that those with higher levels of emotional intelligence had better social support (Mekonen, 2019). These findings suggest that emotional intelligence may be positively associated with social support in Ethiopia.

However, a study conducted among university students in Tanzania found no significant relationship between emotional intelligence and social support (Eustace, 2017). Similarly, a study conducted among healthcare workers in Nigeria found that emotional intelligence was not significantly associated with social support (Oluwagbemiga, Balogun, & Oluwafunke, 2020). These inconsistent findings indicate that the relationship between EI and social support might be influenced by cultural or contextual factors. For example, some studies have suggested that in collectivist cultures, where interpersonal relationships and community are highly valued, individuals with higher emotional intelligence are more likely to perceive and receive social support from others (Miao et al., 2019).

Overall, research from Africa and sub-Saharan African countries has shown mixed results regarding the relationship between emotional intelligence and social support. Thus, further research is needed to better understand the relationship between these factors.

2.6 Emotional intelligence and coping

The relationship between emotional intelligence (EI) and coping has been the focus of research both in Africa and worldwide. Coping is defined as a set of cognitive and behavioral efforts that individuals use to manage stressors and adapt to challenging situations (Folkman & Lazarus, 1988). The literature on EI and coping has produced mixed results, with some studies finding a positive relationship (Olofinbiyi & Akintayo, 2017), while others showing no significant association (Udechukwu & Eseadi, 2019; Abaidoo, 2019)

For example, a study conducted among university students in Nigeria found that those with higher levels of emotional intelligence had better coping skills and were better able to manage stress (Olofinbiyi & Akintayo, 2017). Another study among university students in Ethiopia found that emotional intelligence was positively associated with problem-focused coping, while negatively associated with emotion-focused coping (Dessie & Getnet, 2020).

However, other studies have found no significant relationship between emotional intelligence and coping. A study conducted among healthcare workers in South Africa found that emotional intelligence was not significantly related to coping strategies (Udechukwu & Eseadi, 2019). Similarly, a study conducted among undergraduate students in Ghana found no significant relationship between emotional intelligence and coping (Abaidoo, 2019).

Given these mixed results, this study aimed to examine the relationships among emotional intelligence, social support, and coping strategies among undergraduate students at Addis Ababa University, while also investigating how these variables influence psychological distress through mediation analysis.

2.7 Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework for this study is the Trait Emotional Intelligence (TEI) theory proposed by Petrides and colleagues (Petrides, 2009; Petrides & Furnham, 2003). The TEI theory posits that emotional intelligence (EI) is a trait-based construct that encompasses

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individual differences in perceiving, understanding, and regulating emotions. It suggests that individuals possess varying levels of EI, which can influence their psychological well-being and coping strategies. Trait EI reflects a person's self-perceptions of their emotional abilities, which are deeply embedded in their personality structure.

The TEI theory has been widely applied in studies focusing on emotional intelligence, and it is especially relevant in the context of understanding the relationship between EI and psychological distress. The theory asserts that individuals with higher levels of trait EI are better equipped to manage emotional challenges, which in turn can reduce their levels of psychological distress. For this study, TEI theory serves as the foundation for exploring how individual differences in emotional intelligence relate to mental health outcomes, specifically psychological distress, among undergraduate students.

In addition to the TEI theory, the study draws upon Lazarus and Folkman's Transactional Model of Stress and Coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) to understand how individuals manage psychological distress. According to this model, stress is viewed as the result of an individual's appraisal of a stressor and their coping resources. Emotional intelligence can influence both the appraisal of stress and the selection of coping strategies, thereby shaping the overall psychological outcomes.

The integration of TEI theory, the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping, and social support theory provides a comprehensive lens through which to examine the direct relationships between EI, psychological distress, coping strategies, and social support in this study.

2.8 Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study is based on the Trait Emotional Intelligence (TEI) theory, which posits that emotional intelligence (EI) influences an individual's ability to manage stress and cope with difficult situations (Petrides & Furnham, 2003). Lower levels of

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EI are expected to be associated with higher levels of psychological distress, as individuals with lower EI may struggle to regulate their emotions effectively, leading to increased vulnerability to stress, anxiety, and depression.

In this framework, social support and coping strategies are examined as factors related to EI that influence psychological distress. Individuals with higher levels of EI are hypothesized to have stronger social support networks and to use more adaptive coping strategies, both of which are expected to reduce psychological distress. Social support, as conceptualized in this study, refers to the perceived availability and use of supportive resources from family, friends, and significant others; while coping strategies refer to the methods individuals use to manage and alleviate stress.

Figure 1 Simplified Conceptual Framework of the Study

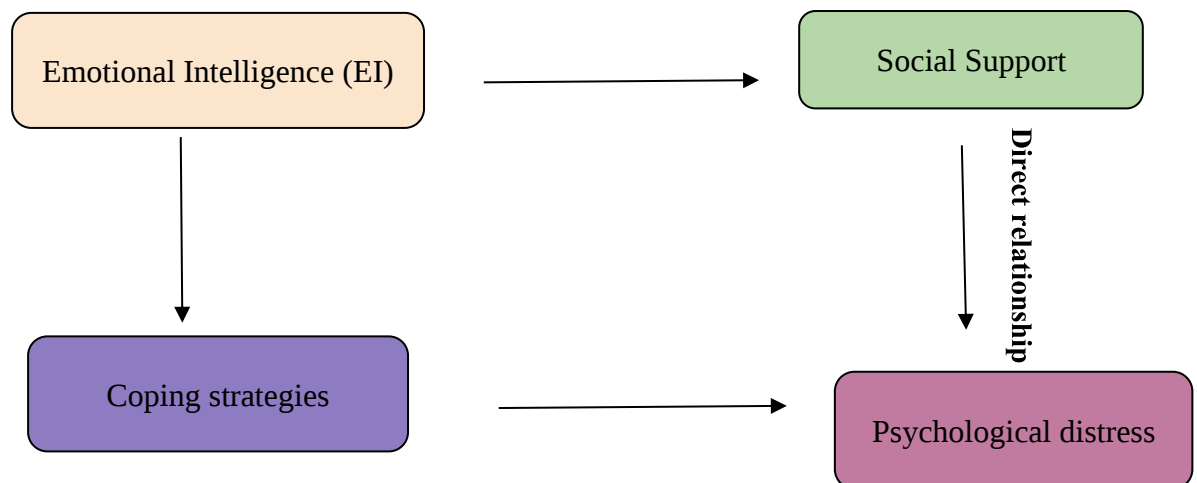


Figure I above represents the relationships between the variables in the study. Emotional intelligence (EI) is hypothesized to have a direct relationship with both social support and coping strategies, which in turn are expected to directly influence psychological distress. Additionally, EI is also posited to have a direct relationship with psychological

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distress, and coping strategies are expected to be directly associated with EI as well. The arrows in the diagram illustrate the direct relationships being explored in the research.

Chapter Three: Research Methods and Procedures

3.1 Research design

This study used a quantitative approach, specifically a correlational design. This design was chosen because it allowed for the examination of the relationship among multiple variables (Kline, 2016).

3.2 The Study Site

Addis Ababa University, located in the capital city of Ethiopia, is the largest and flagship university in the country, with a student population of over 50,000 (Addis Ababa University Office of the Registrar, n.d.). The university comprises multiple colleges, including the College of Business and Economics, College of Social Sciences and Humanities, College of Natural Sciences, and College of Health Sciences, among others (Addis Ababa University Office of the Registrar, n.d.). For this research, undergraduate students from all colleges at Addis Ababa University's main campus were included, ensuring a diverse sample of participants from various academic backgrounds. The location of the main campus provided easy access to various resources and facilities that were useful for the research, such as libraries, computer labs, and administrative offices, ensuring that the study was conducted efficiently and effectively while ensuring the safety and comfort of the participants (Addis Ababa University Office of the Registrar, n.d.).

3.3 Population and sampling

3.3.1 Population

The population for this study is all undergraduate students enrolled at the main campus of Addis Ababa University. The focus was on students from five colleges: the College of Social Sciences, the College of Humanities, Language Studies and Journalism, and Communication,

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the College of Education and Behavioral Studies, and the College of Law and Governance Studies. These colleges provided a diverse cross-section of students across various academic disciplines, which was essential for exploring the relationship between emotional intelligence and psychological distress.

3.3.2 Sampling

Given the diverse distribution of students across different colleges, a stratified random sampling technique was employed to ensure proportional representation from each college. Stratification was based on the college and year level of the students to capture the heterogeneity of the population effectively. The total number of undergraduate students at the main campus was 1,768, distributed among the colleges as follows: College of Social Sciences (521 students), College of Humanities, Language Studies and Journalism and Communication (420 students), College of Education and Behavioral Studies (465 students), and College of Law and Governance Studies (362 students).

3.3.3 Sample size determination

The sample size was determined using the sample size calculation formula for a single proportion (Ary et al., 1996).

The formula used is

$$n = (Z^2 * p * (1-p)) / e^2,$$

Where: n is the sample size

Z is the Z-score for a 95% confidence level (1.96)

p is the estimated population proportion (0.5, as a conservative assumption)

e is the margin of error (0.05, representing 5%)

This calculation yielded a sample size of 385 students. To ensure proportional representation, the sample size was distributed among the five colleges according to their proportion in the total population.

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The selection process involved obtaining a comprehensive list of all undergraduate students from the registrar's office, categorized by college, gender, and year level. Students were divided into strata based on these categories. A proportional number of participants was selected from each stratum by utilizing the respective year-level and major-specific Telegram groups within each college. These groups were contacted and used as the primary means of sampling. To account for potential non-responses, an oversampling strategy was employed, where additional participants were contacted from each Telegram group to ensure the required sample size was met. This approach ensured that the final sample remained representative of the overall population while accommodating any challenges related to participant availability.

The distribution of the population and the corresponding sample sizes for each college and year level are shown in Table 1 below:

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Table 1. Sampling distribution of Students by College, Gender, and Year level

College	Female Population	Male Population	Total Population	Female Sample	Male Sample	Total Sample
College of Social Sciences						
Year 2	135	279	414	37	76	113
Year 3	35	97	132	10	27	37
Year 4	73	145	218	20	39	59
Total (College of Social Sciences)	243	521	764	67	142	113
College of Humanities, Language Studies, Journalism						
Year 2	89	138	227	24	37	61
Year 3	63	134	197	16	36	52
Year 4	83	148	231	21	38	59
Total (Humanities, Language Studies, Journalism)	235	420	655	61	111	172
College of Education and Behavioral Studies						
Year 1	54	87	141	12	19	31
Year 2	40	153	193	9	33	42
Year 3	63	225	288	13	56	69
Total (Education and Behavioral Studies)	157	465	622	34	108	101
College of Law and Governance Studies						
Year 2	64	101	165	14	21	35
Year 3	39	87	126	9	19	28
Year 4	38	108	146	8	23	31
Year 5	33	66	99	7	14	21
Total (Law and Governance Studies)	174	362	536	38	77	79

3.4 Data collection instruments

Self-report questionnaires were used to collect data on socio-demographic characteristics, emotional intelligence, psychological distress, social support, and coping

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strategies. These questionnaires included standardized measures: the Wong and Law Emotional Intelligence Scale (WLEIS), the Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scale (DASS-21), the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support short form (MSPSS-SF), and the Coping Strategies Inventory (CSI).

Socio-demographic characteristics

Socio-demographic data were collected through a separate section in the survey questionnaire. Participants were asked to provide information about their age, gender, college, department, place of residence, and socioeconomic status. Age was an open-ended response, while gender had binary options. Participants selected their college from a provided list and indicated their place of residence as urban or rural. Socioeconomic status was measured using three response options: high, medium, or low. Collecting this data enabled the study to consider the participants' socio-demographic characteristics in the analysis of the variables being studied.

Wong and law Emotional Intelligence Scale (WLEIS)

Emotional intelligence was measured using the Wong and Law Emotional Intelligence Scale (WLEIS), which was developed by Wong and Law (2002). This scale consists of 16 items that assess four dimensions of emotional intelligence: Self-Emotional Appraisal (SEA) (4 items), Others' Emotional Appraisal (OEA) (4 items), Use of Emotion (UOE) (4 items), and Regulation of Emotion (ROE) (4 items). Sample items included statements such as, "I have a good sense of why I have certain feelings most of the time," and "I am a good observer of others' emotions." Participants responded to each item using a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 7 (Strongly Agree).

Previous research has demonstrated the validity and reliability of the WLEIS across diverse populations. Wong and Law (2002) reported high internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha values ranging from .85 to .90, indicating strong reliability in measuring

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emotional intelligence. Additionally, the WLEIS has been shown to have good convergent and discriminant validity, as well as predictive validity for various work and academic outcomes.

While the WLEIS has been primarily used in Asian and Western contexts, its application in African and Ethiopian populations has not been extensively explored. However, given its well-established psychometric properties and widespread use in various cultural settings, including academic and workplace environments, the WLEIS was expected to provide a valid and reliable measure of emotional intelligence in the current study.

Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scale (DASS-21)

Psychological distress was measured using the Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scale-Short Form (DASS-21) (Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995). The DASS-21 is a widely used self-report questionnaire designed to measure symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress. The scale was developed by Lovibond and Lovibond in 1995 and has since been translated into multiple languages and used in various populations around the world, including Africa and Ethiopia.

Studies have demonstrated the reliability and validity of the DASS-21 in different settings. For instance, a study conducted in Nigeria among university students showed high internal consistency and adequate construct validity for the DASS-21 (Olorunshola, 2013). Similarly, a study in Ethiopia among patients with mental illness reported good internal consistency and convergent validity of the DASS-21 (Mulatu & Alem, 1999).

The DASS-21 has been widely used in Africa and Ethiopia to assess symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress in different populations, including university students, patients with mental illness, and the general population (Gelaye et al., 2015; Tadesse & Mekonen, 2017). It has been found to be a useful tool for identifying and monitoring mental health issues in these populations.

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Studies have reported good reliability and validity of the scale. For instance, a study conducted in Ethiopia reported a Cronbach's alpha value of 0.89 for the depression subscale, 0.83 for the anxiety subscale, and 0.84 for the stress subscale, indicating good internal consistency of the scale (Assefa et al., 2020). Another study conducted in South Africa also reported good internal consistency with Cronbach's alpha values of 0.92, 0.86, and 0.84 for the depression, anxiety, and stress subscales, respectively (Chiliza et al., 2019).

Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support short form (MSPSS-SF)

Social support was measured using the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS) (Zimet, Dahlem, Zimet, & Farley, 1988). The scale consists of 12 items and has 3 subscales: Family, Friends, and Significant Other, each containing 4 items. It includes statements such as, “There is a special person who is around when I am in need,” which are answered using a 7-point Likert scale ranging from “Very strongly disagree” to “Very strongly agree.” The scale's internal consistency reliability has been reported to be $\alpha = .85$, and for the subscales Family, Friends, and Significant Other, $\alpha = .85$, $.75$, and $.72$, respectively, when administered to 275 undergraduate students at Duke University (Zimet, Dahlem, Zimet, & Farley, 1988).

The scale has demonstrated good convergent and discriminant validity. For example, the MSPSS-SF has been found to be positively correlated with well-being and negatively correlated with psychological distress (Khanjani et al., 2019; Shanmugasagaram et al., 2015). The MSPSS-SF has been used in various studies in Africa and Ethiopia, including research on mental health among university students (Mekonnen & Fekadu, 2019; Tadesse et al., 2019). Overall, the MSPSS-SF is a valid and reliable instrument for measuring perceived social support.

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Coping Strategies Inventory (CSI)

Coping was measured using the COPE Inventory, which was developed by Carver, Scheier, and Weintraub (1989). The questionnaire contains 24 items, consisting of 7 adaptive coping subscales and 5 maladaptive forms of coping. The adaptive coping subscales measure 'planning,' 'use of emotional social support,' 'use of instrumental social support,' 'restraint coping,' 'active coping,' 'acceptance,' and 'positive reinterpretation and growth,' while the maladaptive coping subscales include 'denial,' 'mental disengagement,' 'behavioral disengagement,' 'focus on and venting emotions,' and 'substance use.' It includes questions such as "I looked for something good in what is happening," which is answered on a three-point Likert scale: "I usually didn't do this at all," "I usually did this a medium amount," and "I usually did this a lot." The scale has a test-retest reliability of .86 and has been found to have good construct validity, convergent validity, and discriminant validity (Carver et al., 1989).

3.5 Data collection procedure

The student researcher shared the Google Form link through Telegram groups and, in some cases, through class representatives. Consent was obtained electronically within the Google Form before participants completed the self-administered questionnaires. This method ensured flexibility and anonymity. The questionnaires were provided in English, the language of instruction at AAU.

To facilitate data collection, the researcher prepared a Google Form containing all the questionnaires. The Google Form was distributed to the students through their class representatives, who shared the link via their group channels online. This method ensured that the questionnaires reached the targeted sample efficiently and conveniently, in line with the stratified random sampling technique used.

To enhance the quality of data, the researcher provided a brief explanation of the questionnaire within the Google Form and offered contact information for any questions or

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clarifications the participants may have had. Participants were able to complete the questionnaires at their convenience, ensuring flexibility and reducing any potential time constraints.

The data collection process was conducted over a period of 12 weeks. The researcher monitored the responses and sent reminders through the class representatives to encourage participation. All collected data were securely stored and handled following standard ethical guidelines.

3.6 Data analysis

Descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, multiple linear regression, and mediation methods were used to analyze the data. Descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation, minimum, and maximum) were first calculated for all study variables as appropriate, including demographic characteristics (age, gender, field of study, and year of study), emotional intelligence, social support, coping strategies, and psychological distress. Age was grouped into four categories (18-19, 20-21, 22-23, and 24-25) to reflect typical undergraduate age ranges and to allow for meaningful comparisons in subsequent analyses. This provided a summary of the data and allowed for the identification of general patterns of the variables.

To analyze differences in emotional intelligence due to socio-demographic characteristics, independent samples t-tests, and one-way ANOVA were conducted. This allowed for the examination of variations in EI based on factors such as gender, age, and academic year. Next, a Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationships among emotional intelligence, social support, coping strategies, and psychological distress. The Pearson correlation coefficient was used to determine the strength and direction of these relationships, ranging from -1 to +1.

Following the correlation analysis, multiple linear regression analysis was employed to explore the contribution of emotional intelligence, social support, and coping strategies in

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predicting psychological distress. Due to a significant positive correlation between positive and negative coping strategies, a composite variable was created by averaging the scores of positive and negative coping strategies. This combined "average coping" variable was used in the subsequent regression analyses to address potential multicollinearity and to provide a more comprehensive measure of overall coping behaviors. According to Carver, Scheier, and Weintraub (1989), combining coping subscales into a single composite score is a valid approach when the subscales are conceptually and statistically related, as it captures a general coping style that individuals employ in response to stress (Carver, Scheier, and Weintraub, 1989).

The findings from the multiple linear regression analysis showed that coping was the only significant predictor of psychological distress among the variables considered. Given this result, a mediation analysis was conducted to further understand whether coping mediates the relationship between emotional intelligence and psychological distress. The results were presented in tables, showing regression coefficients, significance levels, and standard errors for each variable.

All analyses were conducted using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), and statistical significance was set at $p < .05$.

3.7 Ethical considerations

In conducting this research, several ethical considerations were taken into account to protect the rights and well-being of participants. These were clearly outlined within the Google Form used for data collection, ensuring that participants were informed before completing the questionnaire. Informed consent was emphasized, with a detailed description of the study's purpose, objectives, and participants' rights provided at the beginning of the form. Participants were made aware that their participation was voluntary, and that they could withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. By proceeding with the questionnaire, participants gave

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electronic consent to participate. Confidentiality and anonymity were also prioritized, with the Google Form automatically anonymizing responses and ensuring no identifying information was collected. The data was securely stored to protect participants' privacy and prevent unauthorized access. Additionally, the study was designed to minimize harm, particularly regarding sensitive questions related to psychological distress. Participants were informed about the nature of these questions beforehand, allowing them to make an informed decision about their participation. Throughout the research process, voluntary participation was reinforced, with participants reminded that they could stop at any time without negative consequences.

Chapter Four: Results

In this chapter, the results of the study are presented in detail. The chapter outlines the findings obtained from analyzing the data using the techniques described in the data analysis section. The results include a presentation of the socio-demographic characteristics of the 385 undergraduate participants, followed by descriptive statistics such as mean and standard deviation for the main study variables, including emotional intelligence, psychological distress, social support, and coping strategies. Pearson correlation analysis was used to examine the relationships among these variables, while multiple linear regression analysis was conducted to determine the predictors of psychological distress. A mediation analysis was also carried out to investigate the mediating effects of coping strategies on the relationship between emotional intelligence and psychological distress. All analyses were performed using SPSS statistical software package version 29.0.2.0.

4.1. Background Characteristics of Study Participants

Table 2 Socio-Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Age	18-19	75	19.5
	20-21	120	31.2
	22-23	140	36.4
	24-25	50	13.0
Gender	Male	198	51.4
	Female	187	48.6
Year Level	Year 2	100	26.0
	Year 3	110	28.6
	Year 4	85	22.1
	Year 5	90	23.4
Residence	Urban	229	59.5
	Rural	156	40.5
Socio-economic status	High	72	18.7
	Medium	196	50.9
	Low	117	30.4

The sample consisted of 385 undergraduate students, with the majority (67.6%) between the ages of 20 and 23. The gender distribution was almost equal, with 51.4% male and 48.6% female participants. Regarding year level, the largest group was Year 3 students (28.6%), followed by Year 2 (26.0%), Year 5 (23.4%), and Year 4 (22.1%). This distribution highlights a well-represented group across different age ranges, genders, and year levels.

4.2. Descriptive Statistics (summary) of variables in the study

Table 3 provides the overall descriptive statistics of the variables in the study.

Table 3 Descriptive Statistics of variables in the study

Variable	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Emotional Intelligence (EI)	385	3.99	0.50	2.69	5.50
Psychological Distress	385	1.49	0.26	0.71	2.14
Social support	385	3.997	0.58	2.33	5.75
Positive Coping strategies	385	1.998	0.21	1.36	2.50
Negative coping strategies	385	2.013	0.25	1.40	2.80

The data indicate that the mean emotional intelligence score is 3.99 (SD = 0.50), while the mean psychological distress score is 1.49 (SD = 0.26). The mean score for social support is 3.997 (SD = 0.58), reflecting a moderate to high level of perceived support from family, friends, and significant others. The average score for positive coping strategies is 1.998 (SD = 0.21), and for negative coping strategies, it is 2.013 (SD = 0.25), suggesting a balanced use of adaptive and less adaptive coping mechanisms among participants. These results indicate a moderate level of emotional intelligence and psychological distress among the students, with adequate perceived social support and a slightly varied application of coping strategies.

The prevalence of depression among participants, based on the standard DASS-21 cut-off points, revealed that a significant proportion of students fall into higher categories of psychological distress. Specifically, 70.91% of participants were categorized as experiencing extremely severe depression, 17.66% fell into the severe category, and 8.57% showed moderate levels of depression. Only 1.04% of participants reported mild levels of depression, while 1.82% were in the normal range. This distribution indicates that the majority of students

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experience considerable levels of depressive symptoms, suggesting an elevated risk of psychological distress within this population. These findings support the need for university support programs to address the high prevalence rates and ensure the mental well-being of students.

4.3. Difference in Emotional Intelligence due to Socio-Demographic

Characteristics

Table 4 Difference in Emotional Intelligence due to Age, Gender, and Year Level

Variable	Category	Mean EI	Standard Deviation	Inferential Statistic	p-value
Age	18-19	4.18	0.56	F= 1.701	0.107
	20-21	3.93	0.50		
	22-23	4.08	0.52		
	24-25	4.02	0.49		
Gender	Male	3.97	0.50	t= 0.66	0.51
	Female	4.04	0.52		
Year Level	Year 2	4.00	0.51	F= 0.098	0.961
	Year 3	4.01	0.50		
	Year 4	3.98	0.50		
	Year 5	3.97	0.50		
Residence	Urban	3.97	0.49	F=1.89	0.17
	Rural	4.04	0.52		
Socio-economic status	High	4.00	0.55	F=0.045	0.96
	medium	3.99	0.51		
	low	4.00	0.48		

Table 4 results show that emotional intelligence is relatively consistent across the different age groups. Contrary to the initial observation, students aged 18-19 reported a slightly higher EI score (mean = 4.18, SD = 0.56), while those aged 20-21 had the lowest EI score (mean = 3.93, SD = 0.50). Gender differences were minimal, with females showing a marginally higher mean EI score (mean = 4.04, SD = 0.52) compared to males (mean = 3.97, SD = 0.50). Similarly, small differences were observed across year levels, with Year 3 students

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reporting the highest EI (mean = 4.01, SD = 0.50). The results indicate no significant variation in EI based on gender ($t = 0.66$, $p = 0.51$), age ($F = 1.70$, $p = 0.11$), year level ($F = 0.10$, $p = 0.96$), residence ($F = 1.89$, $p = 0.17$), or socioeconomic status ($F = 0.045$, $p = 0.96$). Thus, it cannot be concluded that EI significantly changes as age increases, nor are there meaningful differences based on other socio-demographic characteristics.

4.4. Correlation among Emotional Intelligence, Psychological Distress, social support, coping and socio-demographic variables

Table 5: Correlation between Emotional Intelligence and Psychological Distress, social support, coping, and socio-demographic variables

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Age	1	-.03	.002	-.015	-.029	-.062	-.006	-.061
2. Gender (g_code)	-.03	1	.072	-.034	.021	.017	.054	.036
3. Year of Study	.002	.072	1	-.022	-.042	-.033	.019	.027
4. Emotional Intelligence (EI)	-.015	-.034	-.022	1	-.030	-.033	-.061	.049
5. Psychological Distress	-.029	.021	-.042	-.030	1	-.053	-.100*	-.097
6. Social Support	-.062	.017	-.033	-.033	-.053	1	.021	.010
7. Positive Coping	-.006	.054	.019	-.061	-.100*	.021	1	.129*
8. Negative Coping	-.061	.036	.027	.049	-.097	.010	.129*	1

*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

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Table 5 shows the Pearson correlation coefficients between age, gender, year of study, emotional intelligence (EI), psychological distress, social support, positive coping, and negative coping. The results indicate that there was a very weak negative correlation between emotional intelligence (EI) and psychological distress ($r = -0.030$), suggesting that higher emotional intelligence is minimally associated with lower levels of psychological distress. This weak relationship indicates that, although students with higher EI may be slightly better at managing stress, the effect is not substantial.

In contrast, there was a negligible negative correlation between emotional intelligence and social support ($r = -0.033$) and a similarly weak negative correlation with positive coping strategies ($r = -0.061$), indicating that higher EI is not strongly linked to greater use of positive coping or perceived support. Conversely, emotional intelligence was weakly and positively correlated with negative coping ($r = 0.049$), suggesting that students with higher EI might engage slightly more in maladaptive strategies, although the correlation is minimal.

Psychological distress, on the other hand, demonstrated a weak negative correlation with positive coping ($r = -0.100$, $p < .05$), indicating that students experiencing more distress are somewhat less likely to use positive coping strategies, even though the relationship is weak. Similarly, psychological distress showed a weak negative correlation with social support ($r = -0.053$), implying that higher levels of distress may correspond to a slight decrease in perceived social support, though the effect is non-significant. Psychological distress also showed a marginally negative correlation with negative coping ($r = -0.097$), suggesting that students experiencing distress may slightly rely more on maladaptive coping.

Interestingly, positive coping and negative coping had a significant positive correlation ($r = 0.129$, $p < .05$), indicating that students who tend to use positive coping strategies also tend to engage in negative coping behaviors. This suggests that these coping strategies are not mutually exclusive and may co-occur within the same individuals, reflecting complex coping

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patterns where students may employ both adaptive and maladaptive strategies depending on the situation.

4.5 Association between EI and psychological distress adjusting for social support, coping, and socio-demographic variables

Table 6 Multiple Linear Regression of Psychological Distress on Emotional Intelligence, Adjusting for Socio-Demographic Factors, Social Support, and Coping Mechanisms

Predictors	B	SE	β	t	p	95% CI (Lower)	95% CI (Upper)	Tolerance	VIF
Constant	2.184	0.255		8.577	<.001	1.683	2.685		
Emotional Intelligence	-0.018	0.026	-0.035	-0.681	0.496	-0.069	0.034	0.997	1.003
Coping	-0.197	0.077	-0.131	-2.571	0.011	-0.348	-0.046	0.997	1.003
Social Support	-0.025	0.023	-0.056	-1.095	0.274	-0.070	0.020	0.992	1.008
Age	-0.004	0.006	-0.037	-0.733	0.464	-0.015	0.007	0.993	1.007
Gender	0.011	0.027	0.021	0.415	0.679	-0.042	0.064	0.992	1.008
Year of Study	-0.013	0.014	-0.046	-0.892	0.373	-0.041	0.016	0.991	1.009

Table 6 presents the multiple regression analysis results examining the impact of emotional intelligence, coping, social support, age, gender, and year of study on psychological

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distress. The overall model was significant, $F(6, 378) = 2.28$, $p < .05$, indicating that the predictors explained a significant portion of the variance in psychological distress.

The findings show that coping was the only significant predictor of psychological distress ($B = -0.197$, $SE = 0.077$, $p = .011$). This suggests that students who had higher levels of coping skills reported significantly lower levels of psychological distress, supporting the hypothesis that adaptive coping strategies may act as a protective factor against distress. Emotional intelligence ($B = -0.018$, $SE = 0.026$, $p = .496$) and social support ($B = -0.025$, $SE = 0.023$, $p = .274$) did not significantly predict psychological distress, indicating that these variables might not have a direct impact on reducing distress levels among students. Additionally, demographic variables such as age, gender, and year of study were also non-significant, highlighting that these factors did not contribute to variations in psychological distress.

The collinearity statistics, with VIF values ranging from 1.003 to 1.009, show that multicollinearity was not a concern in the model, as all VIF values were below the commonly accepted threshold of 10. This suggests that the predictors were independent and did not significantly overlap, providing confidence in the robustness of the results.

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4.6 Mediation Analysis Results for Coping Strategies on EI and Psychological**Distress**

Table 7 Parallel Mediation Analysis of the Effects of Social Support and Positive Coping on the Relationship between Emotional Intelligence and Psychological Distress

Outcome Variable	Predictor	B	SE	t	p	95% CI (Lower)	95% CI (Upper)
Coping	Constant	2.0224	0.0701	28.8579	<.001	1.8846	2.1602
	Emotional Intelligence	-0.0045	0.0174	-0.2609	0.7943	-0.0388	0.0297
Psychological Distress	Constant	1.9537	0.1870	10.4455	<.001	1.5860	2.3215
	Emotional Intelligence	-0.0164	0.0261	-0.6307	0.5286	-0.0677	0.0348
	Coping	-0.1983	0.0765	-2.5910	0.0099	-0.3488	-0.0478

Table 7 illustrates the mediation analysis results, examining whether coping mediates the relationship between emotional intelligence and psychological distress. The path from emotional intelligence to coping (Path a) was not significant, $B = -0.0045$, $SE = 0.0174$, $t(383) = -0.261$, $p = .7943$, suggesting that emotional intelligence did not predict coping skills in this sample. The direct effect of emotional intelligence on psychological distress (Path c') was also non-significant, $B = -0.0164$, $SE = 0.0261$, $t(382) = -0.631$, $p = .5286$. This indicates that emotional intelligence alone did not have a direct impact on distress levels.

However, the path from coping to psychological distress (Path b) was significant, $B = -0.1983$, $SE = 0.0765$, $t(382) = -2.591$, $p = .0099$, indicating that higher levels of coping were associated with significantly lower levels of psychological distress. This aligns with the earlier regression analysis results, reinforcing the role of coping in managing distress.

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The indirect effect of emotional intelligence on psychological distress through coping was not significant, $B = 0.0009$, $SE = 0.0042$, 95% CI $[-0.0076, 0.0096]$, suggesting that coping did not mediate the relationship between emotional intelligence and psychological distress. The confidence interval includes zero, indicating no evidence for a mediation effect.

Overall, these findings suggest that while coping independently predicts psychological distress, it does not serve as a mediator in the relationship between emotional intelligence and psychological distress. Therefore, interventions targeting coping strategies might be more effective for reducing distress among students than focusing on emotional intelligence alone.

Chapter Five: Discussion

This section provides an in-depth discussion of the study's findings to research objectives and questions. The discussion contextualizes the results within the broader framework of emotional intelligence (EI) and psychological distress. Each sub-section addresses the specific research questions, linking the outcomes to existing literature and drawing out practical implications for the academic and mental health support contexts.

5.1. Level of Emotional Intelligence among Undergraduate Students

The findings of the study indicated that the average emotional intelligence (EI) score among undergraduate students was 3.99 (SD = 0.50), reflecting a moderate level of emotional intelligence based on the interpretation guidelines of the Wong and Law Emotional Intelligence Scale (WLEIS). According to Wong and Law (2002), EI scores ranging from 3.5 to 4.5 are categorized as moderate, while scores below 3.5 indicate low EI, and scores above 4.5 suggest high levels of emotional intelligence. The moderate EI level observed in this study suggests that, on average, students at Addis Ababa University have a fair ability to perceive, understand, and manage their emotions, as well as navigate interpersonal relationships effectively—skills that are essential for success in both academic and social settings (Abera & Mulugeta, 2018).

This outcome is comparable to similar studies in Ethiopian university contexts, which have reported moderate to high EI levels among university students, indicating that the observed results are consistent with patterns in other academic environments within the region (Abera & Mulugeta, 2018). Such findings imply that students may possess foundational emotional competencies, but there is room for further development, particularly in enhancing their ability to regulate emotions in high-pressure situations (Tsegaye et al., 2018).

The moderate EI score may be attributed to the structured and supportive nature of the university environment, which offers a degree of social and emotional support that could limit the need for students to develop higher levels of emotional resilience and independence. This

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insight aligns with the observations of Tsegaye et al. (2018), who argued that the presence of support systems within universities may inadvertently reduce opportunities for students to face real-world emotional challenges that could facilitate the growth of higher emotional competencies. Furthermore, university students are often in a developmental stage where their emotional regulation skills are still evolving, which may also explain why their EI scores do not fall into the high range (Abera & Mulugeta, 2018).

Overall, while students at Addis Ababa University exhibit moderate EI, interventions targeting the development of advanced emotional skills, such as mindfulness training and emotion-focused workshops, could help further strengthen their emotional intelligence, enabling them to manage both academic and personal stressors more effectively. Such programs would be particularly beneficial in preparing students for post-university challenges where higher emotional intelligence is often linked to better career and life outcomes (Wong & Law, 2002)

5.2. Difference in Emotional Intelligence due to Socio-Demographic

Characteristics

The study revealed no statistically significant differences in emotional intelligence across age, gender, and year level. These findings align with previous studies in similar contexts, such as Olawale and Ogunsanmi (2018), who reported no significant gender differences in EI among university students in Nigeria. Likewise, Mohammadi and Ahadi (2012) found minimal variations in EI based on age and gender among Iranian students, suggesting that gender and age might not be strong predictors of EI in certain cultural settings. One possible explanation for the lack of significant gender differences in this study could be the relatively equal opportunities for academic and social development provided to both males and females in the university setting, which may reduce gender-based disparities in emotional competencies (Suliman & Al-Shuaibi, 2010).

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The absence of significant differences is particularly notable given the strict gender norms typically present in Ethiopian society, which often shape emotional expression and regulation differently for males and females (Abera & Mulugeta, 2018). However, the sample for this study consisted predominantly of students from urban areas (59.5%), who may have been exposed to more progressive social environments and educational settings that promote gender equality and challenge traditional gender roles. This could contribute to the minimal gender differences observed in this study. Furthermore, the university environment itself might offer a more egalitarian space for emotional and social development, thereby minimizing gender-related differences (Tsegaye et al., 2018).

Regarding year level, the results indicated minimal variations in EI scores, with Year 3 students reporting the highest EI ($M = 4.01$, $SD = 0.50$) and Year 5 students the lowest ($M = 3.97$, $SD = 0.50$). However, these variations were not statistically significant ($F = 0.10$, $p = 0.961$). The lack of significant year-level differences is in line with the findings of Extremera and Fernández-Berrocal (2006), who noted that EI tends to remain relatively stable during the university years unless significant external factors influence emotional development.

Similarly, residence (urban vs. rural) and socio-economic status also showed no significant impact on EI scores. Urban students had a slightly lower mean EI ($M = 3.97$, $SD = 0.49$) compared to rural students ($M = 4.04$, $SD = 0.52$), but this difference was not statistically significant ($F = 1.89$, $p = 0.17$). Additionally, students from high socio-economic backgrounds reported a mean EI score of 4.00 ($SD = 0.55$), while those from low socio-economic backgrounds had a mean score of 4.00 ($SD = 0.48$), with no significant variations between groups ($F = 0.045$, $p = 0.96$). These findings suggest that factors such as socio-economic background and residence may play a minimal role in shaping emotional intelligence, particularly in a university context where students have similar educational and social experiences.

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Overall, the results indicate that while there are minor variations in EI due to socio-demographic characteristics, none of these differences are significant. This suggests that other factors, such as individual personality traits or specific life experiences, may have a more substantial impact on the development of EI among university students than demographic variables alone. Future research should explore these alternative factors to gain a deeper understanding of what influences EI development in university populations (Extremera & Fernández-Berrocal, 2006).

5.3. The relationship between Emotional Intelligence and Psychological Distress

Contrary to initial expectations, the results of this study revealed a weak negative and statistically non-significant relationship between emotional intelligence (EI) and psychological distress ($\beta = -0.017$, $p = 0.508$). Although higher levels of EI were associated with slightly lower levels of psychological distress, the effect size was small, indicating that emotional intelligence alone may not play a substantial role in reducing distress levels among undergraduate students at Addis Ababa University. This finding diverges from previous studies conducted in Ethiopian contexts, such as Gebremariam et al. (2020) and Mekonnen et al. (2020), who reported a significant negative correlation between EI and psychological distress among Ethiopian students, suggesting that higher EI was linked to lower stress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms.

The discrepancy between this study and previous findings could be attributed to several factors, including differences in sample characteristics, variations in the measurement tools used, and the potential influence of unmeasured variables that might mediate or moderate the relationship between EI and psychological distress. For example, the current study utilized the Wong and Law Emotional Intelligence Scale (WLEIS), a self-report measure that focuses on perceived emotional abilities, which may capture different aspects of EI compared to other scales such as the Mayer-Salovey-Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test (MSCEIT), which

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measures EI as a cognitive ability (Ciarrochi et al., 2015). Self-reported measures like the WLEIS are also more susceptible to biases such as social desirability, which could potentially skew the results and obscure the true relationship between EI and psychological outcomes.

Moreover, the lack of a significant association in this study may be due to the limited variability in EI scores, as most participants exhibited moderate levels of EI, with a mean of 3.99 (SD = 0.50). This restricted range can reduce the statistical power needed to detect strong associations, as a relatively homogeneous distribution of EI scores means there is less differentiation among participants, making it difficult to observe significant effects. The homogeneity in EI scores may also reflect the shared educational and social experiences of the students, as the structured and supportive university environment provides similar opportunities for emotional development, leading to moderate EI levels across the sample (Tsegaye et al., 2018).

In contrast, previous research by Ezejiofor et al. (2019) in Nigerian university settings reported a similarly weak or non-significant relationship between EI and distress, suggesting that the impact of EI on psychological outcomes may be context-specific and influenced by factors such as cultural norms, educational settings, and the presence of additional protective factors like resilience and social support. Molla (2015) also noted that while EI was significantly associated with anxiety, it did not show a strong correlation with depression or stress among Ethiopian students, further highlighting the complexity of the relationship between EI and different dimensions of psychological distress.

Another possible explanation for the weak relationship observed in this study is that university-specific stressors, such as academic pressure and social expectations, may require coping mechanisms beyond emotional intelligence to manage psychological distress effectively. For instance, resilience, personality traits, and the availability of social support networks may play a more prominent role in buffering against the adverse effects of stress and

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anxiety in a university context (Suliman & Al-Shuaibi, 2010). These findings suggest that while emotional intelligence may provide a foundation for emotional regulation, it may not be sufficient in isolation to protect against severe psychological distress, particularly in high-stress environments like universities (Abera & Mulugeta, 2018).

The current study's findings thus highlight the need for future research to incorporate additional variables, such as resilience and coping strategies, to better understand how these factors interact with EI to influence psychological well-being. Specifically, exploring how social support and individual differences in personality contribute to the relationship between EI and psychological distress may provide more nuanced insights into the protective mechanisms that are most effective in promoting mental health among university students (Mekonnen et al., 2020). By identifying these additional factors, targeted interventions can be developed to enhance students' overall psychological resilience and reduce the prevalence of distress in academic settings.

5.4. The Role of Social Support and Coping Mechanisms in predicting psychological distress

The findings from the regression analysis revealed that coping strategies were the only significant predictor of psychological distress among undergraduate students at Addis Ababa University ($B = -0.197$, $SE = 0.077$, $p = .011$). This suggests that students who utilized effective coping mechanisms reported significantly lower levels of psychological distress, supporting the hypothesis that coping serves as a key protective factor in reducing symptoms of stress, anxiety, and depression. This result is consistent with the findings of Mekonnen et al. (2020), who emphasized that adaptive coping strategies, such as problem-solving and seeking social support, are essential for managing psychological distress in high-stress environments like universities. The significant role of coping observed in this study highlights the importance of

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equipping students with appropriate coping skills to help them navigate academic and personal challenges more effectively.

In contrast, social support did not emerge as a significant predictor of psychological distress ($B = -0.025$, $SE = 0.023$, $p = .274$), which is unexpected given the wealth of literature supporting its protective role in mental health (Gebremariam et al., 2020; Suliman & Al-Shuaibi, 2010). One possible explanation for this finding is that social support may interact with other variables, such as coping strategies, rather than having a direct effect on reducing psychological distress (Ezejiofor et al., 2019). Alternatively, the high levels of distress among the participants (with 70.91% categorized as experiencing severe or extremely severe depression) may have overwhelmed the potential buffering effects of social support, as suggested by Molla (2015). When distress levels are extremely high, the ability to utilize effective coping strategies may become more crucial than perceived social support, which may not be sufficient in isolation to alleviate severe symptoms.

The mediation analysis further supports this interpretation, as coping was found to have a significant direct effect on psychological distress ($B = -0.198$, $SE = 0.0765$, $p = .0099$), while the indirect effect of emotional intelligence on psychological distress through coping was not significant ($B = 0.0009$, $SE = 0.0042$, 95% CI $[-0.0076, 0.0096]$). This indicates that while coping independently predicts psychological distress, it does not mediate the relationship between emotional intelligence and distress, suggesting that other factors may be influencing this relationship. The non-significant mediation effect may be due to the limited variability in EI scores, as most students exhibited moderate EI levels, leaving little room for coping to act as a mediator (Mekonnen et al., 2020).

Furthermore, the study found a significant positive correlation between positive coping and negative coping ($r = 0.129$, $p < .05$), indicating that these coping strategies are not mutually exclusive and may co-occur within the same individuals. This interdependence suggests that

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students who engage in positive coping strategies, such as problem-solving or seeking social support, may also rely on less adaptive strategies like avoidance or self-blame in certain situations. According to Carver et al. (1989), coping is a multidimensional process where individuals may simultaneously employ multiple strategies depending on the nature of the stressor and the context. The observed interdependence between positive and negative coping highlights the complexity of coping behaviors among students and suggests that merely increasing positive coping may not reduce distress if negative coping strategies are not simultaneously addressed.

These findings emphasize the need for interventions that not only promote adaptive coping skills but also target the reduction of maladaptive strategies. For example, teaching students how to identify and replace negative coping mechanisms with more constructive approaches could enhance their overall coping efficacy and reduce psychological distress more effectively (Dessie & Getnet, 2020). Additionally, the complex relationship between coping and social support suggests that future research should explore whether social support moderates or strengthens the effectiveness of positive coping strategies, thereby providing a more comprehensive understanding of how these factors interact to influence psychological well-being (Gebremariam et al., 2020).

Overall, the results underscore the critical role of coping mechanisms in managing psychological distress among university students. While social support may not have a direct impact, it likely serves as a context that enables the effective use of adaptive coping strategies. Therefore, interventions aimed at enhancing students' mental health should focus on strengthening both social support networks and adaptive coping skills, while simultaneously addressing maladaptive strategies that may undermine the benefits of positive coping (Mekonnen et al., 2020).

Chapter Six: Summary, Conclusion and Recommendations

6.1. Summary

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between emotional intelligence (EI) and psychological distress among undergraduate students at Addis Ababa University while considering the role of socio-demographic factors, social support, and coping mechanisms. A correlational research design and a quantitative approach were employed, using a stratified random sampling technique to select 385 participants from five colleges. The sample included 198 male and 187 female students.

The data were collected using standardized self-report instruments: the Wong and Law Emotional Intelligence Scale (WLEIS) to measure EI, the Depression Anxiety and Stress Scale (DASS-21) to assess psychological distress, the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS) to evaluate social support, and the Coping Strategies Inventory (CSI) to identify students' coping mechanisms. The data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics through the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software. Descriptive statistics, such as means and standard deviations, were used to summarize the levels of emotional intelligence and psychological distress, while correlation and multiple regression analyses were conducted to explore the relationships between EI, psychological distress, social support, and coping strategies.

The findings indicated that the average level of emotional intelligence among the students was moderate ($M = 3.99$, $SD = 0.50$). There were no statistically significant differences in EI based on socio-demographic factors such as age, gender, year level, residence, or socio-economic status. Correlation analysis revealed a weak, non-significant relationship between EI and psychological distress ($r = -0.03$). Multiple regression analysis showed that neither EI ($\beta = -0.017$, $p > .05$) nor social support ($\beta = -0.023$, $p > .05$) significantly predicted

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psychological distress. However, coping mechanisms were significant predictors of psychological distress ($\beta = -0.197$, $p < .05$), with coping strategies explaining 19.7% of the variance in distress levels.

Additionally, positive and negative coping strategies were found to be interdependent, indicating that students often use a combination of adaptive and maladaptive strategies when managing stress. Mediation analysis revealed that coping did not mediate the relationship between emotional intelligence and psychological distress. These findings suggest that while emotional intelligence is an important interpersonal skill, coping mechanisms play a more critical role in managing psychological well-being. Therefore, enhancing adaptive coping strategies should be a primary focus for mental health interventions targeting university students.

6.2. Conclusion

The findings of this study provide insights into the emotional and psychological well-being of undergraduate students at Addis Ababa University. The direct effect of emotional intelligence on psychological distress among students in this context appeared to be limited. Instead, coping strategies were more associated with psychological distress, suggesting that the ability to use adaptive coping mechanisms may play a more important role in mental health outcomes than emotional intelligence alone. Although social support did not show a direct impact on distress levels, its potential influence should not be overlooked, as it may act indirectly or interact with other variables not explored in this study. These findings highlight the importance of focusing on enhancing students' coping skills in mental health interventions and suggest further research to examine the relationships between emotional intelligence, coping, and social support within the cultural and academic settings of Ethiopian universities.

6.3. Recommendations

5.4.1 Recommendations for practice or intervention

Given that coping strategies were found to be more associated with psychological distress in this study a coping skills training program could be developed and integrated into the university's mental health services. This program could focus on practical coping techniques, including mindfulness practices, stress management strategies, and cognitive-behavioral approaches. These initiatives might be introduced as part of first-year orientation to help students early on with the skills needed to manage academic pressures and personal challenges during their university experience.

Additionally, mental health services could consider adopting a proactive approach by implementing regular mental health screenings to identify students who may be at risk of psychological distress. These screenings could be followed by targeted support, such as counseling sessions focused on building coping skills tailored to each student's needs. By incorporating these measures, universities can provide support to students who might not actively seek help, ensuring they receive appropriate assistance.

Furthermore, the observed relationship between positive and negative coping strategies suggests that students often use a combination of adaptive and maladaptive strategies when managing stress. Therefore, it is recommended that intervention programs aim to not only promote adaptive coping skills but also directly address and reduce reliance on maladaptive strategies such as avoidance and self-blame. This could be achieved through psychoeducation workshops that help students recognize the negative impacts of maladaptive coping and offer constructive alternatives.

Lastly, considering the cultural context and the levels of distress observed in the sample, it would be beneficial to develop culturally sensitive mental health interventions that take into

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account the unique stressors faced by Ethiopian students. Peer mentorship programs could be introduced to facilitate the sharing of coping experiences in a culturally familiar way. These programs might involve trained student mentors who can support their peers in identifying and using effective coping strategies, strength a sense of community, and enhance overall student well-being.

5.4.2 Recommendations for Future Research

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations can be suggested for future research. First, since coping strategies were more associated with psychological distress, future studies could explore the specific types of coping strategies used by students and their varying impacts on mental health. Research might benefit from examining the relative effectiveness of different adaptive coping mechanisms, such as problem-focused and emotion-focused strategies, to better understand which approaches are more helpful in alleviating distress in university settings.

Additionally, given that emotional intelligence did not significantly predict psychological distress in this study, it is recommended that future research consider including variables such as resilience, personality traits, and academic stress to gain a deeper understanding of what factors interact with EI to influence psychological outcomes. This would help clarify whether EI operates indirectly or in conjunction with other protective factors in reducing distress levels.

Moreover, the non-significant relationship between social support and psychological distress suggests investigating the quality and type of social support students receive. Future studies could examine whether support from family, peers, or university staff has a different impact on a student's mental health and how these sources of support may interact with coping strategies. Such research would provide insights into tailoring support programs to meet students' diverse needs.

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Lastly, since the sample in this study primarily represented students with moderate levels of emotional intelligence, future research should aim to include a more diverse sample with varying levels of EI to determine whether the relationships observed in this study hold true across different groups. Exploring these dynamics across other Ethiopian universities or comparing them with international student populations could also provide a broader understanding of how cultural and environmental factors shape the role of EI and coping in psychological well-being.

6.4. Implications of the study

The findings of this study indicate that coping strategies may have a role in managing psychological distress among university students. While the association was not particularly strong, it suggests that incorporating coping strategies into mental health support could be beneficial.

Mental health services at Addis Ababa University might consider including coping skills in their programs. These could focus on straightforward, practical strategies that help students handle everyday stress, even if the impact on reducing distress is limited. This could provide additional support alongside existing mental health initiatives, assisting students to manage the challenges they face.

Moreover, further research could look into how different coping strategies are used by students and their varying effects on mental health. This might help in understanding how to better support students' well-being in different contexts.

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Appendix: Questionnaires

Addis Ababa University

College of Education and Behavioral Studies

School of Psychology

Dear Participant,

You are invited to participate in a study titled "The Relationship between Emotional Intelligence and Psychological Distress among Undergraduate Students at Addis Ababa University." Your participation involves completing a brief questionnaire, which will take approximately 10-15 minutes. Your responses will remain anonymous and will be used solely for academic research purposes, with no identifying information collected. Participation is voluntary, and you may withdraw at any time without consequences. Please note that some questions may address sensitive topics related to emotional well-being and psychological distress. If you experience any discomfort, contact information for mental health support will be provided at the end of the questionnaire. By proceeding with this survey, you confirm your understanding of the study and consent to participate.

Thank you for your time and valuable contribution to this research.

Section 1: Demographic Information

Age: _____

Gender (Select one):

☐ Female ☐ Male

College (Select one):

☐ College of Social Sciences ☐ College of Education and Behavioral Studies

☐ College of Humanities, Language Studies, Journalism, and Communication

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☐ College of Law and Governance Studies ☐ College of Performing and Visual Arts

Academic Year Level (Select one):

☐ Year 1 ☐ Year 2 ☐ Year 3 ☐ Year 4 ☐ Year 5

Place of Residence (Select one):

☐ Urban ☐ Rural

Socioeconomic Status (Select one):

☐ High ☐ Medium ☐ Low

Section 2: Wong and Law Emotional Intelligence Scale (WLEIS)

Instructions: Rate your agreement with each statement on a scale from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 7 (Strongly Agree).

Statement	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. I have a good sense of why I have certain feelings							
2. I have good control of my own emotions							
3. I am a good observer of others' emotions							
4. I am sensitive to the feelings and emotions of others							
5. I have a good understanding of my own emotions							
6. I really understand what I feel							
7. I always know whether or not I am happy							
8. I am able to control my temper and handle difficulties rationally							
9. I am quite capable of controlling my own emotions							
10. I try to use my emotions to facilitate my work							
11. I am able to use my positive emotions to improve my performance							
12. I always set goals for myself and try my best to achieve them							
13. I am able to help others feel better when they are down							

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Statement	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
14. I can calm down quickly when I am very angry							
15. I have good control over my own emotions							
16. I have the ability to accurately recognize the emotions of others by observing them							

Section 3: Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scale (DASS-21)

Instructions: Rate how much the following applied to you in the past week on a scale from 0 (Did not apply) to 3 (Applied very much).

Statement	0	1	2	3
1. I find it hard to wind down				
2. I was aware of dryness of my mouth				
3. I couldn't seem to experience any positive feeling				
4. I experienced breathing difficulty				
5. I found it difficult to work up the initiative				
6. I tended to over-react to situations				
7. I experienced trembling (e.g., in the hands)				
8. I felt I was using a lot of nervous energy				
9. I was worried about situations where I might panic				
10. I felt that I had nothing to look forward to				
11. I found myself getting agitated				
12. I found it difficult to relax				
13. I felt down-hearted and blue				
14. I was intolerant of anything that kept me from getting on with what I was doing				
15. I felt I was close to panic				
16. I was unable to become enthusiastic about anything				

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Statement	0	1	2	3
17. I felt I wasn't worth much as a person				
18. I felt that I was rather touchy				
19. I was aware of the action of my heart in the absence of physical exertion (e.g., sense of heart rate increase)				
20. I felt scared without any good reason				
21. I felt that life was meaningless				

Section 4: Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS)

Instructions: Rate how much you agree with each statement on a scale from 1 (Very Strongly Disagree) to 7 (Very Strongly Agree).

Statement	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. There is a special person who is around when I need							
2. I can share my joys and sorrows with a special person							
3. My family really tries to help me							
4. I get emotional help and support from my family							
5. I have a special person who is a real source of comfort							
6. My friends really try to help me							
7. I can count on my friends when things go wrong							
8. I can talk about my problems with my family							
9. I have friends with whom I can share my joys and sorrows							
10. There is a special person in my life who cares about my feelings							
11. My family is willing to help me make decisions							
12. I can talk about my problems with my friends							

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Section 5: The COPE Inventory (CI)

Instructions: Select the response that best describes how you usually respond to stressful situations:

1 = I usually didn't do this at all

2 = I usually did this a medium amount

3 = I usually did this a lot

Statement	1	2	3
1. I learned something from the experience			
2. I turned to work or other activities to distract myself			
3. I daydreamed about things other than the event			
4. I looked for something good in what is happening			
5. I got upset and let my emotions out			
6. I tried to get advice from someone about what to do			
7. I let my feelings out			
8. I took additional action to get rid of the problem			
9. I took direct action to get around the problem			
10. I said to myself "this isn't real"			
11. I acted as though it hadn't happened			
12. I asked people who have had similar experiences what they did			
13. I reduced the amount of effort I put into solving the problem			
14. I held off doing anything about it until the situation permits			
15. I forced myself to wait for the right time to do something			
16. I gave up the attempt to get what I want			
17. I tried to get emotional support from friends or relatives			
18. I talked to someone about how I feel			

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Statement	1	2	3
19. I used alcohol or drugs to make myself feel better			
20. I accepted the reality of the situation			
21. I learned to live with it			
22. I drank alcohol or took drugs in order to think about it less			
23. I thought about how I might best handle the problem			
24. I thought hard about what steps to take			