

## LIFE SATISFACTION, SOCIAL SUPPORT AND STRESS AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

Monica Liana Secui<sup>1</sup>      Friderika Sarolta Bede<sup>2</sup>      Delia Iuliana Bîrle<sup>3</sup>  
*University of Oradea*      „We can learn” Center      *University of Oradea*  
*Romania*      *Romania*      *Romania*

### *Abstract*

*This study explored the life satisfaction, perceived stress, and social support among university students, attempting to identify the main stressors experienced by the students, and to verify if age, gender, study level (bachelor and master), relation status, professional status (unemployed, part-time and full-time employee) are significant predictors of life satisfaction. A sample of 144 students participated in the study, aged between 19-25 years old (mean age 21.7 years), 113 female (78.5%) and 31 male (21.5%), enrolled in bachelor (72.2%) and master (27.8%) study programs, having various specializations and coming from several Romanian universities. The data were collected using Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS), Perceived Stress Questionnaire (PSQ), and Multi-Dimensional Support Scale (MDSS). The findings revealed that the most frequent sources of stress are represented by the requirements and responsibilities arising from the academic activities, negative beliefs regarding self-efficacy and lower appearance satisfaction, and also by the conflicts and difficulties related to social relations with parents, friends, and colleagues. In addition, the regression results showed that students' occupation, study level and social support are significant predictors for life satisfaction. Further research is necessary to identify other particular characteristics of the students who are experiencing low levels of life satisfaction in order to develop appropriate health promotion programs.*

*Keywords: life satisfaction, social support, perceived stress, university students, academic transition*

Life satisfaction is a key component of subjective well-being, along with the positive and negative affect experienced by individuals. It refers to the cognitive-judgmental aspect of well-being, defined as the global appraisal of persons quality of life, according to their subjective standards,

---

<sup>1</sup> All authors have contributed equally.

Corresponding author: Associate Professor, Psychology Department, University of Oradea, Romania; E-mail: [msecui@uoradea.ro](mailto:msecui@uoradea.ro)

<sup>2</sup> Psychologist, "We can learn" Center, Suplacu de Barcau, Romania; E-mail: [bedefrida@yahoo.com](mailto:bedefrida@yahoo.com)

<sup>3</sup> Associate Professor, Psychology Department, University of Oradea, Romania; E-mail: [dbirle@uoradea.ro](mailto:dbirle@uoradea.ro)

as the extent to which they feel satisfied with their own life (Diener et al., 1985; Keyes, 2003). Life satisfaction has been studied extensively, the conclusions of the research conducted on this topic showing that high levels of life satisfaction are associated with low levels of perceived stress, depression, anxiety, substance abuse, as well as with high levels of academic performance, self-esteem, quality of social relationships (Hollifield & Conger, 2014; Proctor et al., 2009).

Given that the presence of high levels of life satisfaction is accompanied by positive psychological functioning, the specialists argue for the importance of studying the relation between life satisfaction and stress in the case of university students. Emerging adulthood is marked by multiple challenges due to the academic transition, social relations, academic motivation and performance, concerns regarding the financial situation, professional orientation and employment opportunities (Besser & Zeigler-Hill, 2012). A series of studies also investigated the variations in stress and life satisfaction associated with gender and study levels (Chraif, 2015; Joshanloo & Jovanovic, 2020).

According to the conclusions of a systematic literature review conducted by Ribeiro et al. (2017), studies involving students usually show a close relation between a high level of stress and the deterioration of the quality of life, being associated with a high level of depression, low professional satisfaction, ineffective coping strategies.

The negative relation between stress and life satisfaction is evident in different cultural contexts. Rathakrishnan et al. (2022) indicated, based on the results obtained for Malaysian students, a negative correlation between academic stress and life satisfaction. Chraif (2015) analyzed in a larger research the relationship between reactivity to stress and the level of satisfaction for students in Psychology at the University of Bucharest, the results confirming a statistically significant negative correlation.

Pluut et al. (2015) investigated study-related stressors, study-leisure conflict, and peer social support for first-year students. The regression results have shown that stressors increase study-to-leisure conflict, and decrease both academic satisfaction and performance, while social support increases student satisfaction.

Other studies also draw the attention to the social support, as an important factor in relation to stress and life satisfaction. Valois et al. (2009) have shown that, regardless of adolescents gender and ethnicity, the most strongly significant factor associated with a high level of life satisfaction was the perceived support from parents and other significant adults. Brannan et al. (2012) have examined the relation between perceived social support and indicators of students emotional well-being in three cultural contexts – USA, Jordan and Iran. Perceived social support from family was a significant predictor of life satisfaction for all participants. The results of

Kakada et al. (2019) have indicated that peers social support was positively related to academic satisfaction of Indian students.

## **Method**

### ***Objectives***

In the first part, we aimed to identify the main stressors experienced by the students, and also the relation between their frequency and the level of perceived stress.

Second, we wanted to verify if age, gender, study level (bachelor and master), relation status or professional status (unemployed, part-time and full-time employee) are significant predictors of life satisfaction.

Third, we explored the relation between life satisfaction and other socio-emotional variables, such as perceived stress or social support, in order to see whether they have a significant contribution in explaining the variability of life satisfaction level.

### ***Participants***

A total of 144 students participated in the study, aged between 19-25 years old (mean age 21.7 years), 113 female (78.5%) and 31 male (21.5%), enrolled in bachelor (72.2%) and master (27.8%) study programs, having various specializations and coming from several Romanian universities. Some of the participants (52.1%) declared they are romantic involved. From the professional status perspective, 31.2% of students were employed (18.8% full-time and 12.4% part-time). The data were collected in 2019 (88 participants) and in 2022 (56 participants).

### ***Measures and procedure***

The Perceived Stress Questionnaire (PSQ, Levenstain et al., 1993, adapted by Băban, 1998) was used to assess perceived stress. The PSQ consists of 30 items (Cronbach's alpha .958 in our sample), and can be answered on a 4-point Likert scale (1 "almost never", 2 "sometimes", 3 "often", or 4 "usually").

The Multi-Dimensional Support Scale (MDSS, Winefield, Winefield & Tiggemann, 1992) is a self-report measure of the availability and adequacy of social support. It was used to measure the frequency of supportive behaviors from family, friends and other close/important person (21 items, Cronbach's alpha .877 in our sample); respondents rated each item based on a 4-point Likert scale from 1 (never) to 4 (usually= always).

The Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS, Diener et al., 1985, adapted by Baltatescu, 2014) is a measure of global life satisfaction, consisting in five items (Cronbach's alpha .863 in our sample), with a 7-point response scale ranged from 1 (very dissatisfied) to 7 (very satisfied).

The index of stressor comprises 24 aspects that require adaptive reactions from individuals and it was inspired by the Holmes-Rahe Life Stress Inventory. The respondents' task is to select the degree to which a certain stressor is present in their life based on a five-point Likert scale from 1 (not at all) to 5 (almost always).

The measures were introduced in Google Forms, the invitation to complete the resulting questionnaire being posted on Facebook groups.

## Results

The stressors experienced more often by the students are related to the academic domain (too many responsibilities, high level of academic requirements, 47.72% considered this problem to be always or often presented) and problems related to self-efficacy and physical self-esteem (37.5% of respondents considered this problem to be always or often presented).

Table 1. The relation between the frequency of stressors, perceived stress and life satisfaction (Spearman coefficient)

Variable	Mean	Variable	
		Stress	Life Satisfaction
Too many responsibilities related to academic activities	3.39	.519**	-.330**
Too high academic requirements	3.31	.493**	-.304**
Negative beliefs regarding self-efficacy	2.96	.594**	-.433**
Body image problems and lower appearance satisfaction	2.90	.500**	-.401**
Communication problems in the family	2.61	.403**	-.454**
Difficulties in the relations with parents	2.55	.387**	-.425**
Too many responsibilities at home	2.34	.329**	-.393**
Too high parents' expectations regarding academic performance	2.40	.448**	-.288**
Change of environment	2.34	.210*	-.241*
Conflicts with friends	2.43	.396**	-.434**
Lack of friends	2.17	.474**	-.382**
Difficulties in the relationship with friends	2.07	.374**	-.399**
Difficulties in the relations with academic staff	2.11	.293**	-.379**
Difficulties in the relations with colleagues	2.09	.355**	-.388**
Precarious financial situation	1.65	.242*	-.254*

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

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

The perceived frequency of the stressors from these two domains is associated more closely to the general level of stress (the correlation coefficients have the highest values – see Table 1). The problems regarding self-evaluation are the ones that are more closely negative related to life satisfaction.

The next domain in which the students declared that they are sometimes confronted with problems is represented by the social relations with family members and friends. We noticed that the correlations between the difficulties experienced in the relational domain and the general level of stress are also very significant. Also, this type of problem has a very significant negative correlation to life satisfaction.

The financial situation was an important stressor only for a small percentage of students (5.7% of respondents considered this problem to be always or often presented).

The correlation between the general level of stress and life satisfaction was very significant. (Pearson correlation of  $-.222, p = .008$ )

For the second and third objectives, two multiple regression analysis were conducted. For each of them, the dependent variable was *life satisfaction* and the predictors were organized in socio-demographics variables and socio-emotional variables.

Table 2. The results of multiple regression analysis identifying the significant predictors of students' life satisfaction (socio-demographics variables)

<b>Variables</b>	<b>Beta std. coefficient</b>	<b>t</b>	<b>p</b>
Gender (1=masc)	.000	.000	1.000
Age	-.057	-.613	.541
Occupation (1=stud)	-.240	-3.068	.003
Studies (1=bachelor)	-.453	-4.758	.000
Relation (1=in a romantic relation)	-.047	-.671	.504
R <sup>2</sup> =.322	Durbin-Watson=1.278		
R <sup>2</sup> ajust=.297	F=13.102		
E.S.=30.45	p (F)=.000		

Students' occupation is a significant predictor for life satisfaction; thus, the unemployed students are significantly more satisfied with their life compared to those who are employed. Also, the life satisfaction is greater in master students compared to bachelor students. When we analyzed gender, age and the romantic relation status as predictors, we didn't find values that could explain their contribution in students' life satisfaction. The F value shows that our model is statistically significant, and the chosen predictors explain almost 30% from the variability of the reported results of their life satisfaction.

Table 3. The results of multiple regression analysis identifying the significant predictors of students' life satisfaction

Variables	Beta std. coefficient	t	p
Perceived stress	-.032	-.407	.684
Social support	.519	6.698	.000
R <sup>2</sup> =.282	Durbin-Watson=1.047		
R <sup>2</sup> ajust=.272	F=27.159		
E.S.=31.04	p (F)=.000		

In the case of the second regression analysis, we consider the perceived stress and the social support as possible predictors for the students' life satisfaction. A significant explanatory value was found only in the case of the social support. The entire model explains 27.2% in the variability of the reported results regarding life satisfaction.

### Discussion

Emerging adulthood is considered by the specialists as a period with multiple challenges, frequent changes and instability. For the students participating in this study, the frequency of the stressors specific to the academic field and social relations is associated to a high extent with the general level of stress. These aspects are in agreement with the finding of other studies. The college years expose the persons to new life circumstances and they may experience adjustment difficulties as a result. Entering college is recognized as a stressful time period, due to the major transition into adulthood, students having an increased independence, being more responsible for their own schedule, moving from their parents' home, adapting to new academic requirements, being included in different social groups and building new social relations with colleagues, friends and romantic partners (Besser & Zeigler-Hill, 2012).

The stressors that are more often experienced are related to the academic activity and to the social domain, so it is not surprising that there are also problems related to self-efficacy. In general, transition periods affect the level of self-esteem, because people are faced with new tasks and activities, as well as with new persons and groups. Performance in the new learning context and professional training provides information about one's own abilities, having an important contribution to self-efficacy. The popularity within the new groups and the feed-back provided by colleagues and teaching staff is also important for the level of social self-esteem. A number of specialists have drawn the attention to the fact that, although self-esteem in emerging adulthood increases compared to adolescence, the

transition to college attracts a significant decrease in self-esteem in the first year (Chung et al., 2014).

In the regression analysis conducted by us, gender was not a significant predictor of life satisfaction, the results being in line with those of other recent studies. A meta-analysis on gender differences in subjective well-being conducted by Batz-Barbarich et al. (2018), based on 281 effect sizes for life satisfaction and 264 for job satisfaction, showed no significant gender differences in both types of subjective well-being. Also, Joshanloo & Jovanović (2020) also emphasized that the research on this topic has yielded mixed results: some studies have found that women are more satisfied with their lives than men, and others have found that men are more satisfied. Their analysis across demographic groups and global regions was based on a sample of 1,801,417 participants across 166 countries, drawn from the Gallup World Poll. The results showed that women reported higher levels of life satisfaction than men, but the direction of gender differences in life satisfaction was inconsistent across age and regional groups.

Even if students' occupation was a significant predictor for life satisfaction in our study, unemployed students being significantly more satisfied with their life compared to those who are employed, in the literature the results are conflicting. In a study that investigated the relation between money attitude, life satisfaction and employment in students, Li-Ping Tang et al (2022) found that non-employed students tended to have higher life-satisfaction and think more strongly that money are not related directly to their success. In a comprehensive literature review, Proctor et al (2009) found that unemployment impacts negatively psychological well-being, self-esteem, perceived competence, life satisfaction, school achievement, decision-making self-efficacy in students from different ages (adolescents and youths).

Another finding of interest is the strong relation between life satisfaction and social support. It is widely recognized in the literature that the support of close people contributes to a high level of satisfaction for individuals, and in emerging adulthood the help of these people, be it parents or friends, is essential because persons in this life stage encounter many difficulties (Hollfield & Conger, 2014). Even if during this period there are many changes in the parent-child relationship, studies have proven that the family remains a very important in the lives of youths, the support offered being related to the level of life satisfaction (Lindell & Campione-Barr, 2017; Parra & Reina, 2015). Also, the quality of relations with friends and colleagues represents an important source of intimacy, support, affection and affiliation, but the involvement in close relations suppose also some levels of conflict, which could be an important source of stress (Chow & Ruhl 2014). As adolescents grow older, they report an increase in support offered by their friends and also a decline in conflict in their relations (Camirand & Poulin, 2019). A large number of findings highlighted the

positive relation between students' life satisfaction and the perceived support offered by friends and romantic partners (Kakada et al., 2019; Pluut et al., 2015; Brannan et al., 2012; Valois et al., 2009).

### Conclusions

The findings of our research emphasize the importance of stress and social support for students' life satisfaction. The most frequent sources of stress within this period are represented by the requirements and responsibilities arising from the academic activities, negative beliefs regarding self-efficacy and lower appearance satisfaction, and also by the conflicts and difficulties related to social relations with parents, friends, and colleagues. The analysis of the factors related to life satisfaction confirms the relevance of social support offered by family, friends and romantic partners, drawing the attention on the importance of quality relations for the students' subjective well-being.

Some limitations of the study can be highlighted, the proportion of participants in variables categories (female-male, bachelor-master, employed-unemployed) were deeply unequal, facts that could be associated with possible error sources. Also, the two-moments data collection procedure overlaps pre-post pandemic timing, being an important uncontrolled variable that could be associated with employment, stress and life satisfaction, as well, in our sample.

### References

- Batz-Barbarich, C., Tay, L., Kuykendall, L., & Cheung, H. K. (2018). A meta-analysis of gender differences in subjective well-being: Estimating effect sizes and associations with gender inequality. *Psychological Science, 29*(9), 1491–1503.
- Băban, A. (1998). *Stres și personalitate*. Presa Universitară Clujeană.
- Bălățescu, S. (2014). *Fericirea în contextul social al tranziției postcomuniste din România*. Eikon.
- Besser, A., & Zeigler-Hill, V. (2012). Positive personality features and stress among first-year university students: Implications for psychological distress, functional impairment, and self-esteem. *Self and Identity, 13*(1), 24-44.
- Brannan, D., Biswas-Diener, R., Mohr, C. D., Mortazavi, S., & Stein, N. (2012). Friends and family: A cross-cultural investigation of social support and subjective well-being among college students. *The Journal of Positive Psychology, 8*(1), 65-75.



- Camirand, E., & Poulin, F. (2019). Changes in best friendship quality between adolescence and emerging adulthood: Considering the role of romantic involvement. *International Journal of Behavioral Development, 43*(3), 231–237.
- Chow, C. M., & Ruhl, H. (2014). Friendship and romantic stressors and depression in emerging adulthood: Mediating and moderating roles of attachment representations. *Journal of Adult Development, 21*(2), 106–115.
- Chraif, M. (2015). Correlative study between academic satisfaction, workload and level of academic stress at 3rd grade students at psychology. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences, 203*, 419–424.
- Chung, J. M., Robins, R. W., Trzesniewski, K. H., Nofhle, E. E., Roberts, B. W., & Widaman, K. F. (2014). Continuity and change in self-esteem during emerging adulthood. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 106*(3), 469–483.
- Diener E., Emmons R.A., Larsen R.J., & Griffin S. (1985). The satisfaction with life scale. *Journal of Personality Assessment, 49*(1),71–5.
- Hollifield, C. R., & Conger, K. J. (2014). The role of siblings and psychological needs in predicting life satisfaction during emerging adulthood. *Emerging Adulthood, 3*(3), 143–153.
- Joshanloo, M., & Jovanovic, V. (2020). The relationship between gender and life satisfaction: Analysis across demographic groups and global regions. *Archives of Women's Mental Health, 23*(3), 331–338.
- Kakada, P., Deshpande, Y., & Bisen, S. (2019). Technology support, social Support, academic Support, service Support, and student satisfaction. *Journal of Information Technology Education. Research, 18*, 549.
- Keyes, C. L. M. (2003). Complete mental health: An agenda for the 21st century. In C. L. M. Keyes & J. Haidt (Eds.), *Flourishing: Positive psychology and the life well-lived* (pp. 293-312). American Psychological Association.
- Lindell, A. K., & Campione-Barr, N. (2017). Continuity and change in the family system across the transition from adolescence to emerging adulthood. *Marriage & Family Review, 53*(4), 388-416.
- Li-Ping Tang, T., Kim, J.K., & Li-Na Tang, T. (2002). Endorsement of the money ethic, income, and life satisfaction: A comparison of full-time employees, part-time employees, and non-employed university students, *Journal of Managerial Psychology, 17*(6), 442-467.
- Parra, A., Oliva, A., & Reina, M. D. C. (2015). Family relationships from adolescence to emerging adulthood: A longitudinal study. *Journal of Family Issues, 36*(14), 2002-2020.
- Pluut, H., Curşeu, P. L., & Ilies, R. (2015). Social and study-related stressors and resources among university entrants: Effects on well-being and

- academic performance. *Learning and Individual Differences*, 37, 262–268.
- Proctor, C.L., Linley, P.A. & Maltby, J. (2009). Youth Life Satisfaction: A Review of the Literature. *J Happiness Stud*, 10, 583–630.
- Rathakrishnan, B., Singh, S., Yahaya, A., Kamaluddin M.R., Ibrahim, F., & Ab Rahman, Z. (2022) Academic stress and life satisfaction as social sustainability among university students. *International Journal of Evaluation and Research in Education*, 11(4), 1778-1786.
- Ribeiro, Í. J., Pereira, R., Freire, I. V., de Oliveira, B. G., Casotti, C. A., & Boery, E. N. (2018). Stress and quality of life among university students: A systematic literature review. *Health Professions Education*, 4(2), 70-77.
- Valois, R. F., Zullig, K. J., Huebner, E. S., & Drane, J. W. (2009). Youth developmental assets and perceived life satisfaction: Is there a relationship? *Applied Research in Quality of Life*, 4(4), 315-331.
- Winefield, H. R., Winefield, A. H., & Tiggemann, M. (1992). Social support and psychological well-being in young adults: The Multi-Dimensional Support Scale. *Journal of Personality Assessment*, 58(1), 198–210.

Received  
August 2022

Accepted  
October 2022