# Understanding psychological distress and social adjustment among first-year university students

## Memahami tekanan psikologis dan penyesuaian sosial di kalangan mahasiswa tahun pertama

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## ABSTRACT

This study examined first-year university students' challenges in Tanzania by focusing on the interplay between psychological distress, coping mechanisms, and social adjustment. A mixed approach was applied, where data was collected from questionnaires and interviews with 374 students. Findings revealed a concerning prevalence of psychological distress among first-year students, with 38% experiencing severe distress, 44.5% reporting moderate distress, and only 15.5% exhibiting mental well-being upon entering the university. This distress, encompassing depression, anxiety, and stress, significantly impeded students' social adjustment. The study also revealed a significant negative relationship between psychological distress and social adjustment, coping mechanisms acting as mediators. The study highlighted the intricate dynamics among these factors. It emphasised the importance of recognising coping mechanisms as vital mediators in addressing the impact of psychological distress on students' social adjustment. This understanding can inform targeted interventions and support systems, promoting students' mental well-being, academic success, and overall satisfaction during their transition to university life.

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**ABSTRAK**

Studi ini meneliti tantangan mahasiswa tahun pertama di Tanzania dengan berfokus pada interaksi antara tekanan psikologis, mekanisme penanggulangan, dan penyesuaian sosial. Pendekatan campuran digunakan, di mana data dikumpulkan dari kuesioner dan wawancara dengan 374 mahasiswa. Temuan menunjukkan prevalensi tekanan psikologis yang memprihatinkan di kalangan mahasiswa tahun pertama, dengan 38% mengalami tekanan yang parah, 44,5% melaporkan tekanan sedang, dan hanya 15,5% yang menunjukkan kesehatan mental saat memasuki universitas. Tekanan ini, yang meliputi depresi, kecemasan, dan stres, secara signifikan menghambat penyesuaian sosial mahasiswa. Penelitian ini juga mengungkapkan hubungan negatif yang signifikan antara tekanan psikologis dan penyesuaian sosial, dengan mekanisme koping yang bertindak sebagai mediator. Penelitian ini menyoroti dinamika yang rumit di antara faktor-faktor ini. Penelitian ini menekankan pentingnya mengenali mekanisme koping sebagai mediator penting dalam mengatasi dampak tekanan psikologis pada penyesuaian sosial siswa. Pemahaman ini dapat menginformasikan intervensi yang ditargetkan dan sistem dukungan, mempromosikan kesejahteraan mental mahasiswa, kesuksesan akademik, dan kepuasan secara keseluruhan selama masa transisi mereka ke kehidupan universitas.

## Introduction

Transitioning students from secondary education or tertiary to university is a critical moment in a student's academic life. The period is characterised by various challenging and transformative experiences for many students worldwide (Alipio, 2020). Several demands or requirements are associated with the new academic life students encounter at the university during the transition; they include a new environment, facilitators, friends, lifestyle and a changed academic setup (Ali et al., 2018). This transition often involves leaving a familiar environment, family detachments, establishing new social networks and

adapting to educational demands, which can significantly affect students' psychological well-being and social adjustments. Studies by Tini (2020) and (Ali et al., 2018), revealed that if students unsuccessfully manage challenges in the university, ultimately, they become vulnerable to psychological distress and significantly suffer from adjustment problems, social adjustment (SAD) in particular.

Psychological Distress (PD) has been defined differently by various scholars of psychology in particular; however, the most acceptable definition is that it encompasses the sense of feeling depressed, anxious, and stressed, which can have severe effects on a person (Campbell & Riggs, 2015). In this study, PD is defined as any mental dysfunction experienced by the first-year student that could interfere with the student's social adjustment and overall well-being. Besides, social adjustment is the ability to react effectively and healthily to situations, realities and social relations so that the demands of social life are met acceptably and satisfyingly (Nazir & Özçiçek, 2023). However, in this study, social adjustment referred to the process by which first-year students become integrated into the campus community, build support networks, interpersonal skills, and peer relations, and negotiate the new freedoms afforded by college/university education life. According to (Chandel et al., 2017), individual characteristics, experiences, and interconnections between home, secondary school and university influence students' social adjustment. Thus, in this context, after admission, first-year students must adapt to university social manners, including interpersonal, peer student and staff relations, social behaviours like group studies, sports and games, living with roommates and participating in religious issues (Ali et al., 2018; Mozid, 2022). It was, thus, presumed that psychological distress could affect first-year social adjustment; thus, it is vital to investigate this relationship.

University education is often viewed as a pathway to personal and professional growth, transitioning from secondary school to university presents unique stressors and challenges (Bin & Bakri, 2021). Factors such as academic pressure, financial constraints, separation from family and familiar support systems, and the need to adapt to a new social environment can contribute to psychological distress among first-year students. This distress may affect students' mental health/ psychological well-being. Empirical studies reveal that students go through the social adjustment phase at their own pace, and the level of adjustment varies depending on personality differences, family background, social support, and coping skills (Nazir & Özçiçek, 2023). According to Tini (2020), differences in social adaptation might inhibit or promote reasonable social

adjustment at the university, which consequently leads to a successful transition and mastery of social circumstances that are deemed to ensure students stay at the university and acquire further academic goals. However, Mozid (2022) argue that students' inability to make social adjustments can lead to psychological distress, though if social support is given, it can significantly reduce the likelihood of psychological distress among students.

Understanding the dynamic relationship between psychological distress and social adjustments among first-year university students is vital for educational stakeholders such as counsellors, academic staff, educators and the university administration personnel to provide adequate student support and plan intervention strategies. Globally, studies revealed a significant negative relationship between PD and students' social adjustment, meaning that when students' PD is high, it lowers the students' social adjustment, whereas when social adjustment is high, PD and its effects decrease (Bukhari & Ejaz (2020); Adhiambo et al. (2017); and Nazir & Özçiçe (2023). In addition, Alipio (2020) revealed that psychological distress could affect students' social and academic adaptation as students may face difficulties when trying to adjust to a new university environment and social behaviours, such as feeling overwhelmed by fear, stress, anxiety and a sense of isolation from others. Moreover, students' absence from class, loneliness, feelings of social insecurity, failure to participate in group projects, and dropping out of school are associated with unsatisfactory social relationships Schwitzer et al. (2018); China (2015); Pengpid & Peltzer, (2020) contemplated that students who struggle with socialisation at the university or college are at risk of developing psychological distress. This is because it is more difficult for students to adjust socially rather than academically, emotionally, and institutionally (Alipio, 2020). It is even more difficult for a student with severe psychological distress to adapt to any adjustment, be it academic, social, personal, or emotional adjustment (VanderLind, 2017).

In Africa, studies conducted on the relationship between PD, bullying, and victimisation among Ghana university students have revealed that depression, stress, and anxiety contribute to students dropping out and poor academic performance (Arhin et al., 2019). Again, research done in Ethiopia and Nigeria suggested that PD can cause student's inability to concentrate, difficulties in paying attention, college dropout, examination challenges, isolation, suicidal ideation, sleep disorders, substance abuse, and physical and psychological impairment (Alem et al., 2008; Fentie et al., 2020; Tseng et al., 2005). These problems are associated with students' poor social adjustment and the emergence

of PD, which implies that the two variables have a mutual effect. Tanzania has not been so different from other countries; its students struggle to adjust socially because of PD following the transition from secondary education and tertiary to university (Mboya et al., 2020). However, the perception and attitudes of the majority of the community toward PD believe that people who are experiencing this problem are either possessed by demonic spirits or are bewitched by witchcraft makers; as a result, affected people end up stigmatised and delayed in getting appropriate care.

It has been observed that few scientific studies in Tanzania have been tapped to address the issue of how psychological distress influences social adjustment (SAD) among first-year university students. The impact of psychological distress on students' mental well-being and social achievement is of great concern, as are the maladaptive strategies used by students to cope with psychological distress. Despite evidence from scientific studies, neither of the studies has focused directly on studying the relationship between psychological distress, coping mechanisms and social adjustment among first-year university students in Tanzania (Losioki & Hemed, 2021; Lugata et al., 2020; Mboya et al., 2020; Pengpid & Peltzer, 2020). This situation leaves the mental health of Tanzanian first-year students mental health and psychological well-being questionable. Thus, the main focus of this study was to investigate the interconnectedness between psychological distress and first-year students' social adjustments in the context of Tanzania.

## Method

This study employed the explanatory sequential mixed design. Data collection was done in two phases. In the first part of the study, the researcher collected and analysed quantitative data, followed by the collection and analysis of qualitative data. According to (Cresswell, 2012), mixing methods in research enables one to understand the phenomena under study. It also helps to acquire the relevant information necessary to conduct the research (Creswell, 2014) and (Pardede, 2019) argue that combining both features does not have to be equal; it can be quantitatively dominant or qualitatively driven. The study was quantitative dominant, and the data collection process utilised Kessler's Psychological Distress Scale (K-10) (Wethington & Kessler, 1986), which consists of ten items designed to gauge students' PD levels through a five-point Likert scale. Responses ranged from one (none of the time) to five (all of the time). The total score for the K10 scale was 50, with scores of 10–19 indicating likely wellness, 20–24 indicating mild distress, 25–29 indicating moderate distress, and

30–50 indicating severe distress. The total Cronbach's alpha for K10 scale items was 0.77, considered acceptable, as reliability coefficients above 0.7 are satisfactory.

Additionally, the study employed the Student Adjustment to College Questionnaire (SACQ), consisting of 22 items rated on a five-point Likert scale. The SACQ, initially developed by Baker and Siryk (1989), was adapted to suit the study's context. After piloting, the Cronbach Alpha for the social adjustment items was 0.731. The total score for each respondent was calculated, with higher scores reflecting better social adjustment. This study used 374 samples of first-year university students who were subjected to questionnaires and interviews. The demographic information of the respondents was classified based on their gender, age, year of study, name of the institution they belong to, college and family background, parents' educational background, economic activities and social status.

Data were quantitatively and qualitatively analysed; in the Quantitative data, descriptive statistics (percentages and frequencies) were used to summarise the data, while inferential statistics were employed to examine the relationships between variables. The researcher used structural equation modelling to assess the connections between psychological distress, coping strategies, and social adjustment. In descriptive analysis, the mean responses were used to identify critical trends in students' psychological distress (PD), coping mechanisms (CM), and social adjustment (AAD). The mean was calculated by summing the responses for PD (10 items), CM (28 items), and AAD (22 items) and dividing by the number of items. The response means ranged from 1 to 5, with higher scores indicating better PD, CM, and AAD outcomes. Pearson correlation tests evaluated the relationships between psychological distress, coping strategies, and social adjustment. The alternative hypothesis was tested at a 5% significance level, and decisions to reject the null hypothesis were based on the P-value. Linear regression equations were used in structural equation modelling to analyse the data.

Finally, thematic analysis was done for all qualitative data collected through interviews with students and the university colleges; the researcher familiarised with the data from the field and read and re-read the interviews in order to create initial codes and second codes that were used to formulate themes. The following linear equation was used to show a relationship between the dependent variable, social adjustment scores ($Y_{2i}$), and the independent variable, students' psychological distress scores (Xi). The equation was specified as;

$$Y_{2i}=\beta_0+\beta_1 PD_i+\varepsilon_i \qquad\qquad (1)$$

Mediation:

$$PD_i=\beta_0+\beta_1 CM_1+\varepsilon_i \qquad\qquad (2)$$

$$Y_{2i}=\beta_0+\beta_1 PD_i+\varepsilon_i \qquad\qquad (3)$$

Moderation:

$$Y_{2i}=\beta_0+\beta_1 PD_i+\beta_2 CM_i+\varepsilon_i \qquad\qquad (4)$$

$$Y_{2i}=\beta_0+\beta_1 PD_i+\beta_2 CM_i+\beta_3 PD_i{}^*CM_i+\varepsilon_i \qquad (5)$$

Where: $Y_{1i}$ and $Y_{2i}$ is the first-year students' academic and social adjustment (Dependent variable), $\beta_0$ being the coefficient for the intercept, which is the value of the dependent variable when all the independent variables are zero, while the $\beta_1 - \beta_3$ : is the regression coefficient for each independent variable (PD-Psychological distress and CM-coping mechanism)

## Result

The results of this study are presented based on three approaches used to investigate variables that contribute to the relationship between psychological distress, coping mechanisms, and social adjustment among first-year university students in Tanzania. Results and discussion presented are from the Pearson correlation coefficient, structural equation modelling (SEM), and mediation structures, which show the relationship between psychological distress (PD), coping mechanisms (CM), and social adjustment (SAD). Findings are summarised and presented in terms of figures and Tables. Discussion is made by relating the current study's findings with other studies.

### Demographic information of the study participants

The study's demographic information was obtained from three hundred seventy-four (374) participants from the first-year university student population who completed the questionnaires to measure their understanding of the relationship between psychological distress and social adjustment in Tanzania. Eight participants were sampled to be involved in the interviews for triangulation and acquiring additional information that supplemented the information collected through questionnaires.

Table 1 provides findings on the respondents' demographic information; it presents the frequency and percentage of various categorical variables. It is indicated that an equal number of male and female respondents were included in the study. The slight majority were females (50.3%). The findings suggest that

gender may not be a confounding variable in the research and that the results may be generalisable to both genders. Concerning the findings of this study, the female gender was revealed to have higher experience of psychological distress as compared to the male counterpart students.

**Table 1**

*Demographic Information of the Study*

| Variables | Institution | Category | Frequency | Percent |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Gender** | | Female | 188 | 50.30% |
| | | Male | 186 | 49.70% |
| **Name of institution** | UDOM | University of Dodoma | 297 | 79.40% |
| | SJUT | SJUT | 77 | 20.60% |
| **College/Faculty/School** | UDOM | COED | 194 | 51.90% |
| | | CNMS | 103 | 27.50% |
| | SJUT | FANAS | 63 | 16.80% |
| | | FAHE | 14 | 3.70% |
| **Department** | | EDUCATION | 260 | 69.50% |
| | | BIOLOGY | 114 | 30.50% |
| **Program of study: (e.g., Bachelor of Education with Arts)** | | BAED | 265 | 70.90% |
| | | BSc, Biology | 109 | 29.10% |
| **Male parent's/guardian's occupation** | | Other | 86 | 23.10% |
| | | Peasant | 286 | 76.90% |
| **Female parent's /guardian's occupation** | | Other | 86 | 23.10% |
| | | Farmer | 286 | 76.90% |
| **Parents' Level of Education** | | Non-formal | 21 | 5.60% |
| | | Primary | 180 | 48.10% |

| Variables | Institution | Category | Frequency | Percent |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | Secondary | 117 | 31.30% |
| | | Certificate | 3 | 0.80% |
| | | Diploma | 15 | 4.00% |
| | | Degree | 31 | 8.30% |
| | | Masters | 6 | 1.60% |
| | | PhD | 1 | 0.30% |
| **Do you have a fiancé?** | | Yes | 114 | 30.50% |
| | | No | 260 | 69.50% |

**Source: Field Data (2023)**

Regarding the kind of institution the respondents came from, it is revealed that 79.4% (n = 297)   were from the University of Dodoma, and 20.6% (n = 77) were from ST John University (SJUT). In college and faculty, 51.9% (n = 194) came from the College of Education (UDOM), 27.5% (n =103) were from the College of Natural and Mathematical Sciences (UDOM), 16.8% (n = 63) were from Faculty of Natural and Applied Science (SJUT), and 3.7% were from Faculty of Human Resource and Education (SJUT). Using two universities implies variations in colleges, faculties, or universities may have other implications.

Furthermore, 69.5% were from various fields of education, and 30.5% were from biology. Meanwhile, 70.9% of respondents studied for a Bachelor of Education with Arts (BAED), followed by a BSc in Biology (29.1%). These findings may have implications specifically in the relationship of psychological distress, coping mechanisms and social adjustment, as different programs of study may have various levels of academic preparation, interests, and career goals. These variations can be the source of psychological distress, creation of ways of coping mechanism and not depending on its complexity.

Moreover, most male and female parents/guardians were Peasants (76.9% and 76.9%, respectively), with only a tiny percentage having higher levels of education or a different occupation. This finding suggests that the participants came from rural areas where agriculture was the main occupation. The universities that they are enrolled in are located in urban areas, where the environment and lifestyle are different from where they come from. Thus, due to

those differences, first-year students might need help to adjust to the new environments at the specific university.

Moreover, the findings revealed that 48.1% of students' parents' level of education was primary school, and 31.3% had a secondary school level of education. Only a tiny percentage of them had a higher level of education, where 8.3% were reported to have a bachelor's degree and 1.6% had a master's degree. This finding may suggest that respondents of the current study might have originated from families with limited access to higher education. This situation could lead to the first-year students coming from these families quickly experiencing psychological distress and difficulties in social adjustment due to a lack of family support. Students may also lack an individual from the family who can provide experience about university life, which consequently leads to PD. Finally, Table 4.1 finalises the state of interpersonal relationships among the participants. A relatively small percentage of participants (30.5%) reported having a fiancé, while most (69.5%) did not. This finding may have implications that intimate relationships may or may not influence psychological distress, academic adjustment, career choices, social adjustment, and personal well-being among university students.

## Level of Psychological distress based on K10 scores

The results show that 38% of the sampled first-year university students were experiencing severe psychological distress, 46.5% of them were experiencing moderate psychological distress, and only 15.5% were likely to be well (see Figure 1)

**Figure 1**

*Level of Psychological distress based on K10 scores*



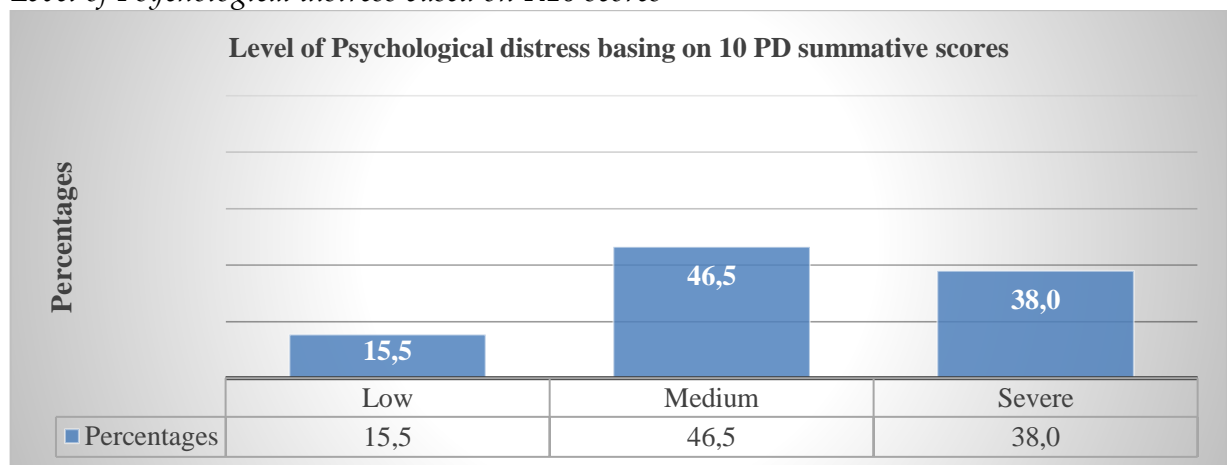| | Low | Medium | Severe |
|---|---|---|---|
| ■ Percentages | 15,5 | 46,5 | 38,0 |

Figure 1 shows that, when this study was conducted, 15.5% of first-year students were free from psychological distress when they joined the university. The rest had indicators of medium to severe psychological distress. This distress appeared in the form of depression, anxiety and stress, which in turn led to a significant barrier to students' social adjustment.

**Table 2**

*Mean And Standard Deviation of Forms of Psychological Distress*

| Variable | Mean | Standard deviation | Min-max | Level of PD |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Depression** | 2.640 | 0.863 | 1-5 | Medium |
| **Anxiety** | 2.609 | 0.860 | 1-5 | Medium |
| **Stress** | 3.135 | 0.939 | 1-5 | Medium |

Based on Table 2, statistics imply that the average level of depression, anxiety and stress among the first-year students was moderated. However, there is variability in individual scores, as indicated by the mean and standard deviation scores. Such findings provide insight into the prevalence and severity of psychological distress among first-year students.

## Coping Mechanism Among First-year Students

Based on the findings of this study, 91% of the first-year students sampled reported experiencing difficulties in coping mechanism (CM) skills ranging from medium to high levels. This study grouped the findings into low, medium and high levels of coping mechanisms. According to the scale, most first-year students' social adjustment was reported to be in a medium level of social adjustment. This implied that students faced difficulties adjusting to the social university setting. A summary of the level of coping mechanisms is summarised in Figure 2.

Figure 2 shows that 70.9% of students who participated in the study had a medium level or ability of social adjustment, and 28.3% had a high level of social adjustment. These findings imply that most first-year students need to be more capable of developing the full potential of social adjustment at the university.

**Figure 2**

*Level of students' social adjustment*
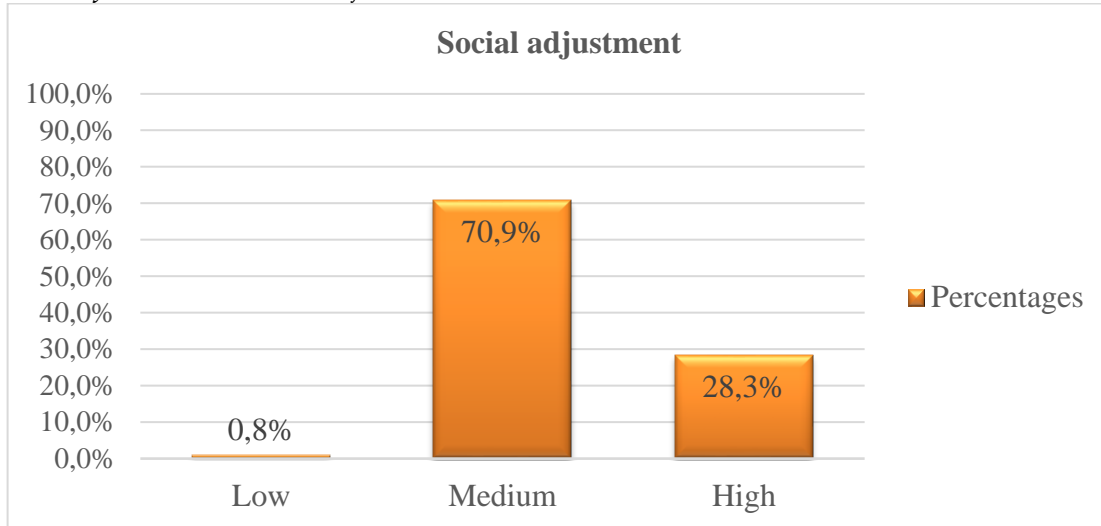


**Correlation Between Students' Psychological Distress (PD), Coping Mechanism (CM) and Social Adjustment (SAD)**

Results from the Pearson correlation coefficient determined the complex relationships between the three variables of PD, CM, and SAD. These findings are summarised and presented in the correlation Table 3

Based on Table 3, it is revealed that there is a weak positive significant relationship between students' coping mechanisms and psychological distress with a correlation coefficient of 0.110 and a p-value of 0.034, which implies that there is a slight positive association between how students cope with stress and the psychological distress (PD), indicates that as coping mechanisms (CM) increase, psychological distress tends to increase slightly as well. Again, Table 2 reveals a statistically significant negative association between social adjustment and psychological distress with a correlation coefficient of -0.137 and a p-value of 0.008. This implies that the higher the student's level of social adjustment, the lower the student's psychological distress. Also, Table 2 unfolded the positive relationship between students' social adjustment (SAD) and the coping mechanism (CM) with a correlation coefficient of 0.097 and a p-value of 0.062. The message drawn from these findings suggests that, while the students' coping mechanism may be related to the increased levels of students' psychological distress, a higher level of students' social adjustment might be associated with reduced students' psychological distress.

**Table 3**

*Correlation Between PD, CM and Social Adjustment (SAD)*

| | | Psychological distress | Coping mechanism | Social adjustment |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Psychological distress | Pearson Correlation | 1 | | |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | | | |
| | N | 374 | | |
| Coping mechanism | Pearson Correlation | .110* | 1 | |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | 0.034 | | |
| | N | 374 | 374 | |
| Social adjustment | Pearson Correlation | -.137** | 0.097 | 1 |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | 0.008 | 0.062 | |
| | N | 374 | 374 | 374 |

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

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

**Source: Field Survey (2023)**

Then, direct and indirect effects between variables were investigated. SEM depicted the path direction relationship among variables as presented in Figure 3 that follows;

**Figure 3**
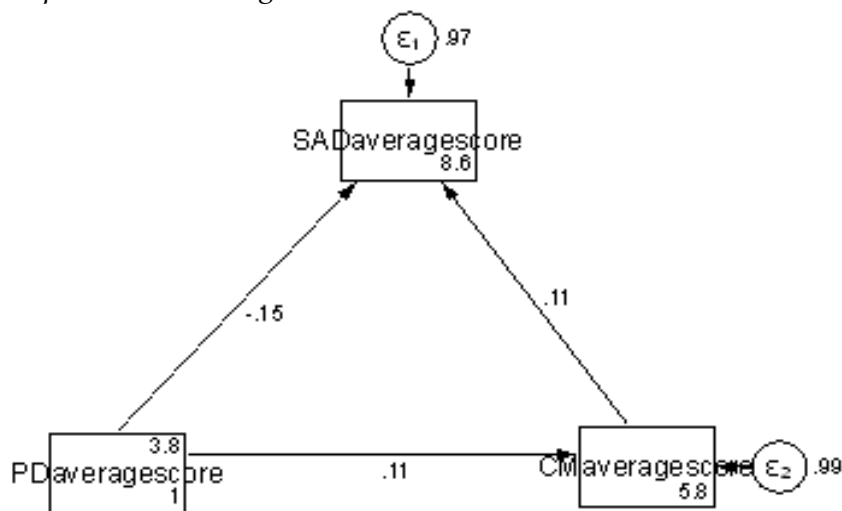
*Structural Equation Path Diagram*

Figure 3 presents the findings about the path direction between social adjustment (SAD), psychological adjustment (PD) and coping mechanism (CM). This figure reveals that psychological distress has a direct negative effect on social adjustment and coping mechanisms. In contrast, coping mechanisms were depicted to affect social adjustment directly. These findings imply that first-year university students' social adjustment was significantly negatively influenced by psychological distress and coping mechanisms. Again, students' psychological distress happened to affect their' coping mechanisms skills. In other words, as psychological distress increases, students' abilities to cope with the distress they encounter also increase. Table 4 shows structural equation modelling (SEM) findings, provide detailed explanations about the model relationship between psychological distress, coping mechanisms, and social adjustment. Table 4 offers results by estimating the interrelationships of variables.

**Table 4**

*Structural Equation Modelling Estimation*

| Standardised coefficients | Coef. | Std. Err. | z | P>z | [95%Conf.Interval | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Structural model | | | | | | |
| Dependent: Social adjustment | | | | | | |
| Coping mechanism | 0.113 | 0.051 | 2.220 | 0.026 | 0.013 | 0.213 |
| Psychological distress | -0.149 | 0.050 | -2.960 | 0.003 | -0.248 | -0.051 |
| _cons | 8.624 | 0.485 | 17.780 | 0.00 | 7.673 | 9.575 |
| Dependent: Coping mechanism | | | | | | |
| Psychological distress | 0.110 | 0.051 | 2.160 | 0.031 | 0.010 | 0.210 |
| _cons | 5.830 | 0.316 | 18.420 | 0.000 | 5.209 | 6.450 |
| Var (e.Social adjustment) | 0.969 | 0.018 | | | 0.935 | 1.004 |
| Var (e. Coping mechanism) | 0.988 | 0.011 | | | 0.966 | 1.010 |

Results presented in Table 4 revealed a positive relationship between students' coping mechanisms and social adjustment among first-year students. The standardised coefficient for coping mechanisms is 0.113 with a P -P-value level of $P < 0.05$, indicating a significant effect of students' coping mechanisms on their social adjustment. In addition, the standardised coefficient for psychological distress was -0.149; this suggests that psychological distress has a negative influence on social adjustment. Notably, these findings were statistically significant with a p-value of less than 0.01, signifying a vigorous relationship.

Within the scope of this study, it is evident that an increase in first-year students' coping mechanisms is linked to a rise in their social adjustment.

## Mediation Structure Between Variables

The current study tested the mediation structure between coping mechanisms, social adjustment and psychological distress. The aim was to investigate how far the coping mechanism can mediate the relationship between psychological distress and students' social adjustments (SAD). Structural equation modelling (SEM) was used to test and analyse the direct and indirect effects of psychological distress on students' social adjustment (SAD) through a mediator variable coping mechanism (CM). The final results are presented in Table 5.

**Table 5**

*Mediation Structure Equation Modelling in Summary*

| Estimates | Delta | Sobel | Monte Carlo |
|---|---|---|---|
| Indirect effect | 0.007 | 0.007 | 0.007 |
| Std. Err. | 0.004 | 0.004 | 0.004 |
| z-value | 1.536 | 1.536 | 1.479 |
| p-value | 0.125 | 0.125 | 0.139 |

**Baron and Kenny's approach to testing mediation**

STEP 1 – Coping mechanism: Psychological distress (PD -> CM) with B=0.078 and p=0.032

STEP 2 – Social adjustment: Coping mechanism (CM -> SAD) with B=0.084 and p=0.027

STEP 3 - Social adjustment: Psychological distress (PD -> SAD) with B=-0.079 and p=0.004

As STEP 1, STEP 2, and STEP 3 are all significant, and Sobel's test above is not significant, the mediation is partial!

**Zhao, Lynch & Chen's approach to testing mediation**

STEP 1 - Social adjustment: Psychological distress (PD -> SAD) with B=-0.079 and p=0.004

As the Monte Carlo test above is not significant and STEP 1 is Significant you have direct-only non-mediation (no mediation)!

RIT = (Indirect effect / Total effect)

(0.007 / 0.072) = 0.091

This means that about 9 % of the effects are psychological distress.

The Coping mechanism mediates social adjustment!

RID = (Indirect effect / Direct effect)

(0.007 / 0.079) = 0.083

That is, the mediated effect is about 0.1 times as

Large as the direct effect of psychological distress on social adjustment!

Table 5 presents the summary of a mediation structural equation modelling analysis, which examines the relationship between students' psychological distress (PD), coping mechanisms (CM), and social adjustment (SAD). The SEM analysis assessed the mediating role of the coping mechanism between PD and SAD among first-year university students. Based on the Baron and Kenny approach to testing mediation, the results suggested partial mediation since, in STEP 1, the regression coefficient for the relationship between CM and PD is 0.078, with a p-value of 0.032. In STEP 2, the coefficient for the relationship between social adjustment (SAD) and coping mechanism (CM) is 0.084, with a P–value of 0.027. In STEP 3, the regression coefficient for the relationship between social adjustment and psychological distress is -0.079, with a p-value of 0.004. Thus, since the findings from all three steps are significant, and Sobel's test is not significant, then it is suggested that mediation is considered partial.

## Discussion

Psychological distress and poor coping skills were interfering factors in the student's social development. This result was consistent with the study conducted in Pakistani at the University of Sargodha by (Ali et al., 2018), who found that the majority of the students at this university had a moderate level of social adjustment, which implies that students needed to be given guidance and counselling regarding the values of the university while at university. Therefore, based on Figure 1 and Figure 2 above, it can be concluded that, among other factors, first-year students' social adjustment is affected by the prevalence of psychological distress. Students revealed that they had some knowledge of coping mechanisms but needed to show the practical ability to cope with challenges encountered at university after the commencement of the first year.

Students' social adjustment is a crucial aspect of their academic life since it is linked with academic achievement, retention, and mental well-being (Ricks & Warren, 2021). The ability of students to cope with the social relationships of the university will improve academic adjustment and even reduce the likelihood of mental distress. The findings of this study are concurrent with those of (Cao, 2022) who revealed that students' adjustment may impact students' mental health since there was a significant negative association between adjustment and mental health. Thus, for a university to improve its students' social adjustment, it should provide a warm and harmonious environment for students and provide psycho-education. These findings were further supported by data obtained from interviews conducted among first-year university students. One of the students had this to say during the interview session;

> "Sir! I have never stayed with more than one person in the same room, but at our university, four to six students live together in the same room. This makes me uncomfortable because we meet people with different behaviours; others are dirty and don't want to clean the room, and some are thieves. So, I am not happy and afraid to put my expensive things in the room. I live like a bird with no home. Most of the time, I feel like going back home." (An interview with a First-year student at SJUT on 27th February 2023)

In the interview above, students express their discomfort with the living arrangements in the university hostels. They mention feeling uneasy because of the diverse behaviours and habits of their roommates, such as some being chaotic and unwilling to clean the room and others engaging in theft. As a result, these students feel they need to be more secure and are afraid to keep their valuable items in the room. Thus, the living situation makes them feel unsafe, and they often complain about returning to their homes. This interview highlights the potential impact of challenging living conditions on first-year university students' psychological well-being and social adjustment. The student's discomfort and insecurity in their living environments could contribute to psychological distress and even affect their overall adjustment to university life.

Similarly, the structure equation model (SEM) enabled the study to assess and comprehensively understand the interrelationship between psychological distress, coping mechanisms, and social adjustment among first-year university students.

Furthermore, by taking coping mechanism as a dependent variable and psychological distress as an independent variable, the coefficient for psychological distress was 0.110, with a standard error of 0.051 and a z-value of

2.160, statistically significant within the p-value of less than 0.05. These findings indicate a significant and positive relationship between students' psychological distress and coping mechanisms, meaning that students' coping mechanisms positively affect social adjustment. In contrast, psychological distress hurts students' social adjustment. Respondents from the interview also supported these findings. During the interview, the university wardens had this to say;

*"The issue of social adjustment among students here at the university has been troubling most of our students. Some of them cannot adjust to the university social sting; they end up isolating themselves and feeling lonely, and others fall into homesickness problems. From our experience, we noticed that psychological problems have been one factor affecting our students differently. They have been failing to live together in hostels. When these challenges become bigger, some have been reporting to the wardens' office, and when they come, they suggest walking away from the hostel. They prefer to rent an individual room to get their privacy".* (An interview with the warden at SJUT on 13th February 2023)

The assertion above shows first-year students in selected universities must accommodate social university settings. Among the factors attributing to students' difficulties in social adjustment and psychological distress are home fever, economic constraints, lack of social skills, and personal issues. However, this study did not intend to investigate the contributing factors for SAD and PD. Still, the prevailing findings imply that guidance and counselling can significantly reduce students' difficulties in social adjustment as they can enhance their mental health and well-being. Similarly, the same respondent depicted a unique factor that seemed to help reduce the effect of psychological distress and difficulties in students' social adjustment. He had the following to say during the interview;

*"We normally offer regular seminars and religion services to our students. This university is a religiously affiliated institution, and therefore, in the university academic timetable, there are special days and hours where the university does not provide an academic programme rather than letting the whole day free for students to worship and be involved in spiritual matters. Through this program, our students have been helped to accommodate and manage to socialise with peers at the universities"* (An interview with the warden at SJUT, on 13th February 2023)

Results from this interview offer several implications regarding the aspects of the relationship between psychological distress, coping mechanisms and social adjustment. Firstly, the university's religious affiliation and provision of religious

services highlight the potential influence of religion as one of the coping mechanisms and strategies for students dealing with psychological distress. Secondly, the university's allocation of specific time for spiritual matters within the academic timetable indicates the importance of a structured coping mechanism. This could help students balance their academic and spiritual lives, positively impacting their social adjustment. Overall, this response from the interview suggests that university authorities should consider factors like region affiliation, structured coping mechanisms, and social interaction, as they can play a significant role in how students manage psychological distress and adjust socially within the university setting.

Besides, the findings of the current study are related to those of (Deasy et al., 2014)who revealed a positive and significant relationship between psychological distress and coping strategies, which represents students' social adjustments at the college; this means students with good coping strategies can develop a practical social adjustment skill and may manage to overcome psychological distress. Again, (Schwitzer et al., 2018) showed that social support from the university can help students make social adjustments and reduce the directed effect of psychological distress among them. This is consistent with the current study that found participating in counselling services can positively benefit students' social adjustment because students who visited the counselling centre (Warden's offices) and remained in counselling as recommended by the counsellor were more likely to experience good social skills.

## Conclusion

Based on the findings presented and discussed in this study. Coping mechanisms have been found to have a positive relationship between social adjustment and psychological distress among first-year university students. This means that students with a good command of coping skills will experience fewer difficulties of social adjustment and psychological distress. Moreover, first-year students reported experiencing varying levels of psychological distress upon entering university, with a majority facing moderate to severe distress. Such distress manifests in forms of depression, anxiety, and stress, which pose a substantial barrier to students' social adjustment and consequently hinder the ability to form relationships, navigate new environments, and engage in social activities. Moreover, students lack sufficient coping skills to effectively manage the challenges encountered at the university, leading to continued psychological distress and compromised social adjustment. Therefore, the findings of this study underscore the need for targeted psych-education initiatives aimed at equipping

first-year students with coping strategies to navigate the university transition successfully and improve their mental well-being.

Furthermore, first-year students need significant help adapting to the university setting's new social dynamics. Factors such as challenging living conditions, cultural differences, and lack of social skills emerged as barriers to students' social adjustment, intensifying their psychological distress. The study emphasised the crucial role of structured coping mechanisms and social support systems, including religious affiliation and counselling service, in fostering students' social adjustments and mitigating psychological distress. Finally, analysis of mediation structures through structural equation modelling underscored the mediating role of coping mechanisms between psychological distress and social adjustment. This study was limited to only two selected universities in Tanzania. Thus, further research can include more universities to have a large, dynamic, and sufficient population sample of students in Tanzania. This will help generalise the findings/ results.

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