

The Relationship Between Academic Stress and Psycho-Spiritual Well-Being among Students of Basic Formation to Religious Life in the Comboni Missionaries, Kenya Province

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the relationship between academic stress and psycho-spiritual well-being among students of basic formation to religious life in the Comboni Missionaries, Kenya Province. It is drawn from a mixed-methods convergent study and focuses on one objective: to examine whether academic stress is associated with psycho-spiritual well-being in this formation context. The population consisted of 66 students in basic formation, including postulants, scholastics, and students in the Brother Centre. Quantitative data were collected using the Academic Stress Inventory developed by Lin and Chen (2009) and the Psycho-Spiritual Wellbeing Scale developed by Egunjobi et al. (2023). Qualitative data were collected through interviews on students' lived experiences of academic pressure, spiritual support, community life, and coping. Quantitative data were analysed using reliability analysis and Pearson product moment correlation, while qualitative data were coded thematically and integrated with the quantitative result through a joint-display logic. Reliability analysis showed strong internal consistency for both instruments, with Cronbach's alpha of 0.91 for the Psycho-Spiritual Well-Being Scale and 0.89 for the Academic Stress Inventory. Pearson correlation analysis revealed a weak negative but statistically non-significant relationship between academic stress and psycho-spiritual well-being, $r = -.176$, $p = .158$, $N = 66$. The qualitative themes do not statistically confirm a buffering mechanism, but they provide contextual evidence that vocation, prayer, spiritual direction, counselling, community support, rest, recreation, time management, and faith-based reframing may help students carry academic pressure without a marked decline in psycho-spiritual well-being. The study concludes that academic stress was present but not significantly associated with psycho-spiritual well-being in this single-site Comboni formation context. The findings should be interpreted cautiously because of the small sample, single congregation, cross-sectional design, and absence of formal moderation or mediation testing.

Keywords: academic stress, psycho-spiritual well-being, religious formation, Comboni Missionaries, seminary formation, mixed methods

INTRODUCTION

Academic formation is an essential component of preparation for religious life and missionary service. In the Comboni Missionaries, Kenya Province, students in basic formation are expected to integrate philosophical, theological, human, community, pastoral, and spiritual dimensions of formation. This makes their formation experience distinct from ordinary university life. Academic work is not only a pathway to intellectual competence; it is also connected to vocational discernment, progression in formation, community evaluation, and readiness for future ministry (Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, 1990; Comboni Missionaries, 1988, 1991).

Academic stress refers to the psychological and emotional pressure that arises from academic demands, performance expectations, examinations, workload, feedback, and adjustment to institutional learning requirements. In religious formation, these academic stressors may be intensified by structured community life, prayer schedules, formation reports, intercultural living, and the expectation that intellectual development should support spiritual growth rather than weaken it. A student may therefore experience academic stress not only as difficulty with courses or assignments, but also as anxiety about vocation, suitability, identity, and belonging (Barbayannis et al., 2022; World Health Organization, 2023).

Psycho-spiritual well-being refers to the integration of psychological health and spiritual rootedness. It includes self-awareness, connectedness, meaningfulness, compassion, and self-transcendence. Within religious formation, psycho-spiritual well-being is visible in inner peace, vocational clarity, healthy relationships, spiritual discipline, emotional resilience, and the capacity to interpret life experiences in the light of faith. The central concern of this study is therefore whether academic stress is related to psycho-spiritual well-being among students in basic formation (Egunjobi, 2024; Egunjobi et al., 2023).

The Comboni Missionaries of the Heart of Jesus are an international Catholic religious congregation founded by St. Daniel Comboni. In Kenya, basic formation takes place in different communities, including the postulancy in Ongata Rongai, the scholasticate communities in Nairobi, and the Brother Centre. These communities operate within the same Comboni charism but bring together students from different national, cultural, linguistic, and educational backgrounds. This multicultural and formative context provides a rich setting for examining how academic stress relates to psycho-spiritual well-being (Comboni Missionaries, 1988, 1991).

Formation Context and Publication Focus

This study condenses a wider dissertation into a focused manuscript on the relationship between academic stress and psycho-spiritual well-being. It retains only the background, literature, method, findings, and discussion that directly clarify this relationship. The purpose of this narrowing is to avoid unnecessary repetition and to keep the study centred on the statistical finding and the qualitative explanation of that finding.

The Comboni formation context is not a neutral academic environment. It is an institutional, intercultural, and spiritual setting in which students are expected to grow intellectually while deepening self-knowledge, faith, emotional stability, relational maturity, and missionary commitment. Academic pressure is therefore interpreted within a larger vocational and communal framework. The relevant question is not only whether students experience academic demands, but whether those demands are associated with reduced psycho-spiritual well-being.

The qualitative strand is used as explanatory evidence and not as proof of statistical mediation or moderation. The correlation result provides the statistical answer to the objective, while the interviews clarify how students understand and manage academic pressure through prayer, community, counselling, spiritual direction, rest, and faith. This integrated interpretation follows a mixed-methods logic in which numbers describe the relationship and narratives explain its lived meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Academic Stress and Psycho-Spiritual Well-Being

Studies on university students show that academic stress is associated with workload, examinations, performance pressure, sleep problems, reduced well-being, anxiety, and reduced academic confidence (Barbayannis et al., 2022; Mutiso et al., 2023). In religious and seminary contexts, the issue becomes more complex because academic demands are interwoven with spiritual growth, vocational discernment, community expectations, and institutional evaluation. Formation documents of the Church emphasize integral formation, meaning that intellectual development should be harmonized with spiritual, human, pastoral, and apostolic development rather than pursued in isolation (Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, 1990).

Research on seminarians and clergy indicates that stress may arise from academic requirements, personal demands, role expectations, formation structures, loneliness, community relationships, and uncertainty about

future ministry. Jankowski et al. (2024) found that seminary students' sense of community was associated with well-being, while Machogu et al. (2022) identified social support, rest, counselling, physical exercise, and optimism as protective factors in religious contexts. These findings suggest that stress does not operate alone; its relationship with well-being depends on personal and contextual resources.

Psycho-spiritual well-being has been conceptualized as a holistic state that integrates emotional stability, self-knowledge, meaningful relationships, spiritual rootedness, compassion, and self-transcendence (Egunjobi, 2024; Egunjobi et al., 2023). In religious formation, this well-being is supported by prayer, spiritual direction, communal life, sacramental practice, personal reflection, and a sense of vocation. These resources may reduce the perceived impact of academic stress by helping students reinterpret difficulties, sustain hope, and remain connected to God and community; however, such a protective role needs to be tested directly through moderation or mediation analysis rather than assumed from correlation alone (Machogu et al., 2022; Ratanasiripong & Tsai, 2020).

Academic Stress in Integral Formation

Academic stress in religious formation should not be reduced to examination anxiety. A student in basic formation is not only preparing for academic success but also for a life of consecrated commitment. The student must therefore interpret academic work in the light of prayer, community, discipline, pastoral identity, and the expectations of the congregation. This makes academic stress both an educational and a formative issue (Barbayannis et al., 2022; Mutiso et al., 2023; World Health Organization, 2023).

Within the Comboni context, intellectual formation is expected to support missionary readiness. Philosophy, theology, language acquisition, pastoral exposure, and personal study are not simply courses to be completed; they are part of the gradual preparation of a missionary who must think critically, communicate across cultures, and serve people in complex social realities. When academic demands are well accompanied, they can deepen faith, widen vision, and strengthen missionary identity. When they are poorly managed, they can produce anxiety, fatigue, and feelings of inadequacy (Comboni Missionaries, 1988, 1991).

The literature also points to the importance of institutional climate. Academic stress can arise from unclear expectations, fear of negative reports, harsh correction, lack of dialogue, and the perception that academic weakness may be interpreted as vocational weakness. In a formation setting, the teacher or formator can become both an academic evaluator and a vocational authority. The emotional effect of academic feedback is therefore stronger than it would be in many ordinary educational settings (Jankowski et al., 2024; Machogu et al., 2022).

Psycho-Spiritual Well-Being as a Protective Resource

Psycho-spiritual well-being is central to the interpretation of this study because it measures an integrated form of human and spiritual functioning. The P-SWBS domains used in the dissertation - self-awareness, connectedness, meaningfulness, compassion, and self-transcendence - capture dimensions that are especially relevant to religious formation. Self-awareness helps the student recognize inner movements and emotional reactions. Connectedness concerns relationship with self, others, God, community, and a larger reality. Meaningfulness reflects purpose and vocational clarity. Compassion reflects empathy, service, and solidarity. Self-transcendence reflects movement beyond self-preoccupation toward surrender, generosity, mission, and union with God (Egunjobi, 2024; Egunjobi et al., 2023).

These domains are not accidental in a missionary congregation. The Comboni charism places strong emphasis on compassion, internationality, community, and commitment to mission. A student who experiences himself as connected, compassionate, and meaningful is better placed to interpret academic difficulty as part of growth rather than as a threat to identity. This does not remove stress, but it changes the way stress is processed. A student who has a strong sense of meaning may endure pressure differently from one who experiences study only as performance (Comboni Missionaries, 1988, 1991; Kweyu et al., 2023).

Prayer, meditation, spiritual direction, confession, recreation, and community sharing can function psychologically as forms of emotional regulation, cognitive reframing, and social support. They also function spiritually as practices of trust, discernment, surrender, and communion. The present study therefore treats

psycho-spiritual well-being as an integrated reality that is both human and theological (Machogu et al., 2022; Ratanasiripong & Tsai, 2020).

The Research Gap

The research gap addressed by this study concerns the limited empirical attention given to the relationship between academic stress and psycho-spiritual well-being among students in basic religious formation in African missionary contexts. Much existing research on academic stress focuses on university students generally, while studies on clergy and religious often focus on ordained priests, professed members, or burnout in ministry. The formative stage remains less studied, even though it is the period in which candidates develop patterns of coping, prayer, relational adjustment, academic discipline, and vocational self-understanding (Jankowski et al., 2024; Machogu et al., 2022).

This study contributes by examining whether academic stress is statistically related to psycho-spiritual well-being among Comboni Missionaries students in Kenya Province and by using qualitative themes to explain the nature of that relationship.

The gap is also methodological. Studies of religious formation often report protective practices such as prayer, spiritual direction, community support, counselling, and recreation, but they do not always show how these practices are integrated with quantitative results. This study therefore strengthens the mixed-methods presentation by linking the correlation result with qualitative themes in a joint display and by distinguishing between contextual interpretation and statistically tested mechanisms.

Objective of the Study

This study was guided by one objective:

- To examine the relationship between academic stress and psycho-spiritual well-being among students of basic formation to religious life in the Comboni Missionaries, Kenya Province.

Research Hypothesis

The study tested the following null hypothesis:

- H0: There is no statistically significant relationship between academic stress and psycho-spiritual well-being among students of basic formation to religious life in the Comboni Missionaries, Kenya Province.

Theoretical Framework

The study was guided by Pearlin's Stress Process Theory and Fowler's Faith Development Theory. Pearlin's Stress Process Theory explains how stressors affect well-being through social roles, personal resources, coping strategies, and support systems (Pearlin et al., 1981; Pearlin, 1999). This theory is appropriate because students in basic formation occupy multiple roles: student, candidate for religious life, community member, cultural learner, and future missionary. Academic stress may therefore generate secondary stressors such as fear of failure, vocational uncertainty, relational tension, and weakened self-confidence. At the same time, coping resources such as prayer, counselling, community support, and self-discipline may buffer the effect of stress.

Fowler's Faith Development Theory views faith as a developmental process through which individuals construct meaning, deepen commitment, and integrate belief into life (Fowler, 1981). This theory is useful because psycho-spiritual well-being in formation depends not only on emotional stability but also on the student's capacity to interpret academic pressure, correction, disappointment, and vocational uncertainty through faith. Together, the two theories show that academic stress and psycho-spiritual well-being may not relate in a simple linear way. Stress may weaken well-being, but faith, meaning, community, and accompaniment may protect or transform the stress experience.

Application of Stress Process Theory to the Relationship

Pearlin's Stress Process Theory is useful because it does not assume that stressors automatically produce negative outcomes. Instead, it asks how stressors are filtered through personal resources, social support, coping strategies, and meaning structures. In this study, academic stressors included teacher-related pressure, results stress, tests stress, group study stress, peer stress, time-management stress, and self-inflicted stress. These stressors were real, but the statistical relationship between overall academic stress and psycho-spiritual well-being was weak and not statistically significant. Stress Process Theory helps interpret this outcome by drawing attention to possible protective resources such as structured prayer, community life, spiritual direction, confession, routines, and peer support. The present study, however, did not statistically test these resources as mediators or moderators; their role is therefore interpreted qualitatively and theoretically (Pearlin et al., 1981; Pearlin, 1999).

The theory also helps interpret the qualitative data. When students spoke about going to their brothers, taking a break, trusting God, or letting go of what could not be changed, they were describing coping mechanisms. Some were social coping strategies, others were spiritual coping strategies, and others were cognitive reframing strategies. The formation house therefore functioned not only as a source of demands but also as a source of resources. This explains why a setting can produce academic stress and at the same time sustain psycho-spiritual well-being.

Application of Faith Development Theory to the Relationship

Fowler's Faith Development Theory contributes a second interpretive lens by showing that faith matures through reflection, meaning-making, commitment, and integration. The students in the study are not merely acquiring information; they are learning to interpret their lives in relation to God, vocation, community, and mission. Academic pressure can either threaten faith or deepen it, depending on how it is interpreted. The qualitative finding that academic learning sometimes pushed students back to the Bible and Church documents shows that academic work can become a route to deeper spiritual understanding (Fowler, 1981).

Faith Development Theory helps explain how students may interpret academic pressure within a larger vocational and spiritual meaning system. In such a context, stress may be carried as part of growth rather than experienced only as a destructive force. This interpretation is consistent with the qualitative data, but it should be read as a contextual explanation rather than as statistical evidence that faith directly moderates the stress-well-being relationship.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study adopted a mixed-methods convergent design. The quantitative strand measured academic stress and psycho-spiritual well-being, while the qualitative strand explored lived experiences of academic pressure, spiritual support, community life, and coping. The design was appropriate because the objective required both numerical measurement and contextual interpretation (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

The quantitative component was treated as the dominant strand because the study's objective required a correlation test. The qualitative component had an explanatory role. It was used to clarify why the expected negative relationship may have appeared weak and non-significant, and how students interpreted academic pressure within vocation, prayer, community, and accompaniment. Integration occurred at two points: during interpretation and through a joint display that connects the statistical result with qualitative themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Participants

The participants were 66 students of basic formation to religious life in the Comboni Missionaries, Kenya Province. The sample included postulants, scholastics, and students in the Brother Centre. Since the population was small and accessible, a census approach was used and the quantitative response rate was 100%. Selected

participants were also involved in qualitative interviews and were coded using participant identifiers such as P01, P02, P03, P04, and P05 to protect confidentiality (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

The census approach was appropriate for the accessible population, but it also limits external generalization. The 66 participants represented different stages of formation within one missionary congregation and one province. The findings therefore describe the Comboni Missionaries, Kenya Province, rather than all seminaries, formation houses, religious congregations, or cultural contexts.

The group included students from several nationalities. This international composition is significant because academic stress may be intensified by language, cultural adjustment, educational background, and differing expectations of authority. It also means that psycho-spiritual well-being is shaped by intercultural community life. The theme of intercultural meaning therefore emerged naturally from the composition of the formation community (Zhang & Noels, 2024).

Research Instruments

Academic stress was measured using the Academic Stress Inventory (ASI) developed by Lin and Chen (2009). The ASI measures seven domains: teachers' stress, results stress, tests stress, studying-in-groups stress, peer stress, time-management stress, and self-inflicted stress. Psycho-spiritual well-being was measured using the Psycho-Spiritual Wellbeing Scale (P-SWBS) developed by Egunjobi et al. (2023). The P-SWBS measures self-awareness, connectedness, meaningfulness, compassion, and self-transcendence. Qualitative data were collected using an interview guide that explored academic pressure, spiritual life, community support, coping practices, cultural experience, and psycho-spiritual resilience.

The Academic Stress Inventory was suitable because it captured several sources of academic pressure rather than treating stress as a single undifferentiated experience. The Psycho-Spiritual Wellbeing Scale was also suitable because it captured the integrated nature of the dependent variable. Instead of measuring only psychological well-being or only spiritual practice, it examined domains that belong to both human and spiritual development. In the context of religious formation, this is methodologically important because well-being is both psychological and spiritual (Egunjobi, 2024; Egunjobi et al., 2023).

Quantitative Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics version 23. Cronbach's alpha was used to determine the internal consistency of the Academic Stress Inventory and the Psycho-Spiritual Wellbeing Scale. Pearson product moment correlation was used to examine the association between academic stress and psycho-spiritual well-being at the .05 level of significance. The analysis did not include moderation or mediation testing because the study focused on the primary bivariate relationship and the sample size was limited.

Qualitative Coding, Reflexivity, and Trustworthiness

Qualitative data were analysed thematically following the logic of familiarization, initial coding, theme development, theme review, theme naming, and selection of representative quotations (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Interview responses were read repeatedly to identify recurring meanings related to academic pressure, vocational anxiety, prayer, spiritual direction, counselling, community support, intercultural adjustment, time management, rest, and recreation. Related codes were grouped into themes that explained how students experienced academic stress and how they sustained psycho-spiritual balance.

Reflexivity was important because the topic concerns religious formation, vocation, authority, and personal disclosure. To reduce interpretive bias, the analysis distinguished between participants' direct accounts and the researcher's interpretation of those accounts. Direct quotations were retained to keep participants' voices visible. Credibility was strengthened through transparent coding description, use of participant identifiers, inclusion of representative quotations, comparison between quantitative and qualitative strands, and supervisory or peer review of emerging interpretations. However, formal inter-coder reliability statistics and systematic participant member checks were not reported; this limitation is acknowledged in the limitations section.

Mixed-Methods Integration

The quantitative and qualitative findings were treated as complementary forms of evidence. The Pearson correlation examined whether academic stress was statistically associated with psycho-spiritual well-being. The qualitative themes then clarified how students interpreted stress and which resources they drew upon. The qualitative evidence was not used to prove that prayer, community, or accompaniment statistically moderated the relationship. Rather, it provided contextual explanation for the weak and non-significant correlation and identified mechanisms that future studies could test directly.

Ethical Considerations

Participation was voluntary. Respondents were informed about the purpose of the study, confidentiality, anonymity, and their right to withdraw. Codes rather than names were used in the reporting of qualitative findings. The study respected the dignity of participants and avoided disclosure of personal identities (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

The ethical dimension was especially important because the study dealt with students in a formation setting where authority, vocation, and personal disclosure are sensitive matters. Anonymity and confidentiality were therefore necessary not only as technical research requirements but also as pastoral safeguards. Participants needed to be protected from the possibility that their honest reflections on stress, formation pressure, cultural misunderstanding, or emotional pain might be interpreted as weakness or resistance.

RESULTS

This section presents the findings according to the single objective of the study: the relationship between academic stress and psycho-spiritual well-being among students of basic formation to religious life in the Comboni Missionaries, Kenya Province.

Reliability Analysis

Table 1 Reliability Analysis

Scale	Cronbach's Alpha
Psycho-Spiritual Well-Being Scale (P-SWBS)	0.91
Academic Stress Inventory (ASI)	0.89

Reliability analysis indicated strong internal consistency for both instruments. The P-SWBS recorded Cronbach's alpha of 0.91, while the ASI recorded 0.89. These coefficients exceed the commonly accepted threshold of 0.70, indicating that the two instruments were reliable for examining the relationship between academic stress and psycho-spiritual well-being in the present study (Lin & Chen, 2009; Egunjobi et al., 2023).

Relationship Between Academic Stress and Psycho-Spiritual Well-Being

Table 2 Pearson Correlation Between Academic Stress and Psycho-Spiritual Well-Being

Variables	Pearson Correlation (r)	p-value	Interpretation	N
Academic Stress and Psycho-Spiritual Well-Being	-0.176	0.158	Weak negative relationship; not statistically significant	66

Pearson product moment correlation showed a weak negative relationship between academic stress and psycho-spiritual well-being, $r = -.176$. This means that higher academic stress was associated with slightly lower psycho-spiritual well-being. However, the relationship was not statistically significant, $p = .158$, $N = 66$. Since the p -value was greater than .05, the null hypothesis was not rejected. The study therefore did not find sufficient statistical evidence to conclude that academic stress significantly reduces psycho-spiritual well-being among students in this formation context.

The negative direction of the correlation remains theoretically meaningful because it agrees with the expectation that stress may place pressure on well-being. Nevertheless, the non-significant result should be interpreted cautiously. It may reflect a genuinely weak association in this context, the presence of unmeasured protective resources, limited statistical power due to the small sample, or a combination of these factors. The qualitative findings give contextual meaning to the result but do not statistically prove a buffering effect.

"Our vocation is not ours but a gift from God... it helped me to trust in God." (P01)

This statement illustrates how one participant interpreted academic and formation pressure within vocation and trust in God. It helps explain how stress may be carried with faith in this context, but it should not be read as statistical evidence that vocation or prayer moderated the correlation.

QUALITATIVE THEMES EXPLAINING THE RELATIONSHIP

The qualitative data broadened the numerical result by showing how students experience and interpret academic stress within religious formation. The themes are not separate objectives; they are interpretive lenses that explain the weak and statistically non-significant relationship.

Academic Stress as Vocational and Existential Pressure

The first theme is that academic stress in basic religious formation is vocational and existential. Students do not experience poor performance, negative reports, or demanding instruction merely as academic events. Such experiences may raise questions about suitability, acceptance, and continuation in formation. The study reported that some participants experienced emotional pain when academic or formation feedback appeared to question their vocation. These experiences show that academic stress can touch the deepest level of identity and calling.

This theme deepens the interpretation of the correlation result. Academic stress may be emotionally powerful, but its effect on psycho-spiritual well-being depends on whether students have resources that help them interpret and carry such stress. When correction is experienced as harsh, unfair, or culturally insensitive, the student may experience not only academic pressure but also spiritual discouragement, shame, or vocational anxiety. Formation therefore needs evaluative practices that are clear, humane, dialogical, and culturally sensitive (Zhang & Noels, 2024).

"Things I cannot change should not stress me that much... I just let it go." (P04)

This statement shows how one participant managed academic and formation pressure through acceptance and cognitive reframing. The student does not deny stress, but chooses not to be consumed by what lies outside personal control. This response gives contextual meaning to the weak relationship between academic stress and psycho-spiritual well-being.

Intercultural Meaning and Formation Adjustment

The second theme concerns intercultural meaning. The Comboni formation context is international and multicultural. This enriches the community, but it also creates situations where behaviour is interpreted differently. Silence, greeting customs, care for the sick, and expressions of respect may carry different meanings across cultures. When formators or peers misread these behaviours, students may feel misunderstood or judged. Such experiences can become hidden sources of stress even when students remain outwardly functional (Zhang & Noels, 2024).

The implication for the relationship between academic stress and psycho-spiritual well-being is that stress is filtered through cultural meaning. A student may not be weakened by academic pressure alone, but by academic pressure combined with misunderstanding, isolation, or fear of being judged. Conversely, when intercultural life is accompanied well, it can become a source of growth and resilience rather than a source of harm.

"Sometimes my culture is challenged... but sometimes I feel supported because interacting with brothers from different cultures helps me grow." (P01)

This participant statement captures the ambivalence of intercultural formation. Culture is both challenged and expanded. The student recognizes the pain of adjustment, but also the growth that comes from living with brothers from different backgrounds. This explains why intercultural experience can both intensify stress and strengthen psycho-spiritual maturity.

Prayer and Spiritual Practices as Inner Regulation

Prayer, meditation, Eucharistic participation, confession, and spiritual reflection emerged as central resources for maintaining psycho-spiritual well-being. Participants did not describe prayer merely as a scheduled obligation. They described it as a living process of surrender, acceptance, emotional regulation, and renewed purpose. Prayer helped students release what they could not control and return to God with their burdens (Ratanasiripong & Tsai, 2020).

This theme gives one possible explanation for why the relationship between academic stress and psycho-spiritual well-being was weak. Prayer provided a way to reinterpret pressure, reduce emotional reactivity, and restore inner balance. It also strengthened faith development by helping students connect academic experience with spiritual meaning. In psychological terms, prayer can support emotional regulation; in spiritual terms, it can renew trust and dependence on God (Fowler, 1981; Ratanasiripong & Tsai, 2020).

Spiritual Direction, Confession, and Counselling

Spiritual direction, confession, and counselling were identified as structured forms of accompaniment that strengthened self-awareness and coping. Participants explained that counselling helps in understanding personal responses, identifying triggers, and developing coping mechanisms to prevent burnout. These practices connect directly with psycho-spiritual well-being because they help students integrate emotion, faith, vocation, and behaviour (Machogu et al., 2022).

This theme shows that psycho-spiritual well-being is best supported when spiritual and psychological accompaniment work together. Spiritual direction helps students discern God's movement in their lives, while counselling helps them understand emotions, triggers, and coping patterns. Together, these practices may help students carry academic stress more constructively, although the present study did not statistically test their specific effects.

Community Support and Brotherhood

Community support emerged as one of the strongest protective themes. Students relied on brothers and peers for emotional release, conversation, encouragement, and belonging. This finding gives practical meaning to the weak correlation because academic pressure may be less damaging when a student is not isolated and can share burdens within a supportive community (Gopalan et al., 2022; Kweyu et al., 2023).

"I go among my brothers... I express what I am going through... and I feel relieved." (P02)

This quotation illustrates community as a practical setting for emotional release. Community life is therefore not only a value in religious formation; it may also be a psycho-spiritual resource that helps students manage academic pressure.

Time Management, Rest, and Recreation

Time management, rest, and recreation helped students regulate academic pressure. Participants explained that stress is reduced when academic tasks are addressed early rather than postponed, and that breaks, walking, sleep, and flexible personal timetables help recovery. These strategies show that academic resilience in formation is not sustained by prayer alone. Students also need rest, recreation, healthy scheduling, and permission to recover (Johnston et al., 2022; Pearlin, 1999).

"When I feel like too much... I give myself a break... then I come back refreshed." (P04)

This quotation is important because it challenges any formation culture that treats rest as laziness or weakness. The participant describes rest as a restorative practice that allows him to return to his responsibilities with renewed energy. In this sense, recreation is not an escape from formation but a condition for sustainable formation.

Overall, the qualitative findings suggest that academic stress and psycho-spiritual well-being do not operate in a simple direct relationship in this context. The quantitative finding shows no statistically significant association, while the qualitative findings reveal possible protective resources that help students interpret, absorb, resist, and transform pressure. The integrated interpretation is therefore cautious: Comboni students in basic formation experience academic stress, but prayer, community, accompaniment, rest, and meaning may help them sustain psycho-spiritual balance (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between academic stress and psycho-spiritual well-being among students of basic formation to religious life in the Comboni Missionaries, Kenya Province. The main quantitative finding was a weak negative but statistically non-significant correlation, $r = -.176$, $p = .158$, $N = 66$. Therefore, the study did not find sufficient statistical evidence to conclude that academic stress significantly reduces psycho-spiritual well-being in this sample.

Interpretation of the Non-Significant Correlation

The non-significant result should not be interpreted as proof that academic stress is unimportant. It means that, in this sample and with the available measures, academic stress was not significantly associated with psycho-spiritual well-being. The weak negative direction is consistent with stress theory, but the size of the association was small and the sample size may have limited statistical power. A more cautious interpretation is therefore that academic stress was present, but its measurable relationship with psycho-spiritual well-being was weak in this formation context.

The qualitative themes help explain this result without overstating it. Participants described resources such as prayer, spiritual direction, counselling, community support, rest, recreation, time management, and faith-based reframing. These resources may have helped them carry academic pressure, but the present study did not test them as statistical buffers. Future research should examine whether these variables moderate or mediate the relationship between academic stress and psycho-spiritual well-being.

Discussion in Relation to Integral Formation

The findings support the principle that academic formation cannot be separated from human and spiritual formation. Academic seriousness is necessary for missionary preparation because future ministry requires theological understanding, critical thought, communication, and pastoral competence. At the same time, intellectual formation should not eclipse prayer, community, rest, personal accompaniment, and vocational discernment. When these dimensions remain connected, students may be better able to experience academic pressure as part of growth rather than as a threat to identity (Comboni Missionaries, 1988, 1991; Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, 1990).

Discussion in Relation to Academic Stress Literature

The findings partly agree with wider literature showing that academic stress can be associated with reduced well-being among students. Workload, examinations, results, feedback, and teaching methods can create pressure (Barbayannis et al., 2022; Mutiso et al., 2023). However, the present study suggests that the relationship may be context-dependent. In a religious formation setting, academic stress may be filtered through vocation, community expectations, spiritual meaning, intercultural adjustment, and accompaniment.

The findings also show that academic stress in formation may become vocational stress when feedback, results, or reports are interpreted as judgements on suitability for religious life. This makes communication, evaluation, and accompaniment central to psycho-spiritual well-being. Formators and teachers therefore need to provide clear expectations, respectful correction, and specific growth-oriented feedback rather than ambiguous or fear-producing judgement.

Discussion in Relation to Psycho-Spiritual Well-Being

Psycho-spiritual well-being appears in the qualitative data as a lived integration of faith, self-awareness, community, meaning, compassion, and emotional regulation. Students who drew on prayer, counselling, spiritual direction, brotherhood, and rest described ways of sustaining inner balance despite academic pressure. This interpretation is coherent with religious formation, where the goal is not the absence of pressure but the growth of persons who can live with pressure, ambiguity, sacrifice, and mission demands without losing interior freedom (Egunjobi, 2024; Egunjobi et al., 2023).

Formation Evaluation and Cultural Sensitivity

A broadened discussion of the relationship must also address the role of evaluation and authority. The qualitative data show that negative reports, misunderstood behaviour, harsh correction, and uncertainty about progression can cause deep emotional pain. In international formation communities, cultural misunderstanding may intensify this pain. A student's silence, greeting style, or way of showing care may be judged through the wrong cultural lens (Zhang & Noels, 2024).

This finding has strong practical implications. Academic and formation evaluation should be transparent, dialogical, and culturally informed. Formators need intercultural competence so that they do not mistake cultural difference for fear, immaturity, or lack of vocation. Evaluation should help students grow, not crush their dignity. Correction should be truthful but also pastoral, humane, and hope-giving.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

The findings point to practical implications for formation houses. Formation communities should strengthen humane academic accompaniment by ensuring that expectations are clear, feedback is constructive, and academic reports are communicated in a way that promotes growth rather than fear. Intercultural competence should be integrated into formation for both students and formators, especially where international communities bring different meanings to silence, greeting, care, authority, correction, and emotional expression.

Psycho-spiritual accompaniment should also be normalized. Spiritual direction, confession, counselling, mentoring, peer sharing, and community reflection should not be reserved only for crisis situations. The timetable should protect prayer, rest, recreation, and community sharing because these practices help students sustain psycho-spiritual balance. Students should also be supported in practical self-management skills, including time management, study planning, emotional self-awareness, responsible communication, and healthy rest habits.

Finally, formation houses should develop explicit systems for identifying early signs of distress. Students in religious formation may underreport stress in order to appear mature, faithful, or vocationally strong. Regular check-ins, counselling access, peer support, and safe spaces for conversation can help prevent academic pressure from developing into hidden psycho-spiritual strain.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The study was limited to 66 students in one religious congregation and one province. This limits generalizability to other congregations, diocesan seminaries, women religious formation houses, countries, and cultural contexts. Although the census approach strengthened coverage of the accessible population, the sample remained small and may have missed subtle associations between academic stress and psycho-spiritual well-being.

The study also used self-report instruments, and students in religious formation may underreport stress or present themselves as more stable than they feel. The cross-sectional design does not allow causal conclusions. The weak negative relationship should therefore be interpreted as an association within this specific sample, not as evidence that academic stress never affects psycho-spiritual well-being.

The qualitative data added depth, but the reported qualitative procedure has limitations. Formal inter-coder reliability statistics and systematic participant member checks were not included in the analysis as reported. The qualitative themes therefore strengthen contextual understanding, but they should not be treated as independently

verified causal mechanisms. In addition, the discussion identifies possible protective resources such as prayer, community support, spiritual direction, counselling, coping strategies, and rest, but these were not tested statistically as moderators or mediators.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study recommends that Comboni formation houses and similar religious formation institutions strengthen integrated formation by balancing academic rigor with human, psychological, communal, and spiritual support. Formation should preserve resources that students described as helpful, including prayer, spiritual direction, counselling, peer support, recreation, rest, and time management.

Future research should include larger, multisite, and more diverse samples across religious congregations, diocesan seminaries, women religious formation houses, and African cultural contexts. Such studies would improve generalizability and allow more robust statistical testing. Longitudinal designs are also recommended to examine whether academic stress and psycho-spiritual well-being change across stages of formation.

Further analysis should test moderation or mediation models to determine whether community support, prayer, spiritual guidance, counselling, coping strategies, rest, or intercultural adjustment reduce the effect of academic stress on psycho-spiritual well-being. Future mixed-methods studies should use formal joint displays, detailed coding procedures, reflexive statements, member checks where feasible, and inter-coder agreement or peer-review procedures to strengthen credibility.

At the practical level, formators should receive regular training in intercultural communication, feedback skills, trauma-informed accompaniment, academic mentoring, and psycho-spiritual discernment. Academic planning should be coordinated with the rhythm of spiritual and community life so that examinations, major assignments, retreats, pastoral commitments, and formation evaluations do not create avoidable overload.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the relationship between academic stress and psycho-spiritual well-being among students of basic formation to religious life in the Comboni Missionaries, Kenya Province. Pearson correlation showed a weak negative but statistically non-significant relationship, $r = -.176$, $p = .158$, $N = 66$. Since the p -value was greater than .05, the null hypothesis was not rejected. The study therefore did not find sufficient statistical evidence to conclude that academic stress significantly reduces psycho-spiritual well-being among the students.

The qualitative themes clarified the lived meaning of this finding. Academic stress in formation was not merely intellectual pressure; it also involved vocation, evaluation, culture, relationships, and belonging. At the same time, students relied on prayer, brotherhood, spiritual direction, confession, counselling, time management, rest, recreation, and trust in God. These resources may help explain why academic stress showed only a weak relationship with psycho-spiritual well-being, but they were not statistically tested as buffering mechanisms.

The study therefore presents a cautious and balanced conclusion: academic stress was present among Comboni students in basic formation, but it was not significantly associated with psycho-spiritual well-being in this small, single-site sample. The practical challenge for formation is to maintain academic seriousness while strengthening the spiritual, communal, psychological, and intercultural supports that help students remain integrated and mission-ready.

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