

**PERSONALITY TRAITS, COPING STYLES AND PROMOTION ANXIETY
AMONG ACADEMIC STAFF IN UNIVERSITIES IN CROSS RIVER STATE**

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ABSTRACT

The study investigated personality traits, coping styles as correlates of promotion anxiety among academic staff in universities in Cross River State. To achieve the purpose of the study, two null hypotheses were formulated. A correlation design involved 602 academic staff drawn through multi stage sampling from the University of Calabar and Cross River State University of Technology, who had spent at least five years in the universities was used. Data were collected with the questionnaire titled: “Academic Staff Personality and Anxiety Disposition Scale (AS – PADS). The hypotheses were tested using inferential statistical tools like Pearson Product Moment Correlation Co-efficient and Multiple Regression Analysis. Findings revealed among other things that personality traits of harm avoidance and avoidance coping styles correlated positively with promotion anxiety. On the other hand, the personality trait of self directedness and coping style of problem focused contributed marginally to promotion anxiety. Based on the findings, it was recommended that personality traits and coping styles used in the study were critical in explaining promotion anxiety among lecturers.

Introduction

Promotion is a vital tool in academic systems, intended to reward merit, recognize excellence, and foster professional growth. In Nigerian universities, however, the promotion process is increasingly perceived not just as an administrative milestone, but as a psychological burden that triggers feelings of uncertainty, anxiety, and distress. The continuous demand for high-impact publications, postgraduate supervision, and global visibility often under resource-constrained conditions has contributed significantly to what many lecturers experience as promotion anxiety. Also, the promotion of an academic staff either in the university, college

of education polytechnic or monotechnic is a fundamental human resource practice designed to reward excellence, recognize research output, and encourage continuous professional growth within the educational system. However, beyond its merit-based intentions, promotion processes often exert psychological pressure on academic staff. Recent studies suggest that promotion exercises are increasingly perceived as anxiety-inducing due to the emphasis placed on scholarly publications, external visibility, and metrics-driven evaluation criteria (Ali, Musa, & Haruna, 2020; Nwosu & Nweke, 2021). In many Nigerian universities, the "publish or perish" culture has intensified emotional stress, leading to what has been described as promotion anxiety a unique form of psychological distress rooted in fear, self-doubt, and professional uncertainty.

Promotion anxiety can affect motivation, productivity, and even social functioning of university lecturers. According to Osakwe and Edokpolor (2019), most lecturers view promotion as a high-stakes event, often fraught with unclear criteria, bureaucratic delays, and academic politics. These conditions foster heightened anxiety and mental health challenges. Research has also shown that promotion-related stress does not affect all lecturers equally; rather, it is moderated by personal characteristics and psychological traits (Bello, Adeyemi & Lawal, 2022). Among the key variables identified in psychological research are personality traits and coping styles. Traits such as harm avoidance the tendency to fear uncertainty, stress, and criticism are consistently associated with anxiety and poor emotional adjustment (Yen, Ko & Chen, 2019; Xu, Li & Zhou, 2020). On the other hand, self-directedness, a trait involving goal-oriented behaviour and personal responsibility, is often linked with resilience and lower anxiety levels (Liu Wang & Zhang, 2021). Likewise, coping styles the habitual ways individuals respond to stress play an important role. Problem-focused coping, which involves addressing the stressor directly, is typically adaptive, while avoidance coping, which involves ignoring or distancing from the issue, has been shown to exacerbate anxiety symptoms (Chen, Zhang & Zhao, 2020; Habib, Yusuf & Osuolale, 2022).

Despite the growing recognition of mental health challenges in academia, there is limited empirical evidence in Nigeria specifically examining how personality traits and coping styles predict promotion anxiety. This gap is especially critical in Cross River State, where lecturers operate under intense workload conditions and limited institutional support. This study is therefore designed to address the following questions:

1. What is the nature of the relationship between personality traits (harm avoidance and self-directedness) and promotion anxiety among academic staff in universities in Cross River State?
2. What is the composite and relative contribution of coping styles (problem-focused and avoidance coping styles) to the prediction of promotion anxiety among academic staff in universities in Cross River State?

The relationship between Personality Traits (harm avoidance and self-directedness) and Promotion Anxiety

Personality traits are enduring psychological characteristics that influence how individuals perceive and respond to stressors in their environment, including occupational challenges like promotion requirements. In academic institutions, these traits can moderate how lecturers react to promotion-related pressures such as research output expectations, publication targets, and peer evaluation. **Harm avoidance**, one of the core temperament traits identified in Cloninger's psychobiological model of personality, is characterized by excessive worrying, fear of uncertainty, and shyness (Cloninger, Svrakiv&Przybeck, 1993). Research shows that individuals high in harm avoidance are more prone to experience heightened anxiety in professional settings. Yen et al (2019) demonstrated that harm avoidance significantly predicted anxiety and depressive symptoms among professionals in high-pressure work environments. Their findings imply that academic staff with high harm avoidance traits may perceive promotion exercises as threatening, thereby experiencing increased anxiety. Similarly, **Xu, et al (2020)** found that harm avoidance was positively associated with work-related anxiety among Chinese university lecturers, especially in environments where career advancement depends heavily on competitive publication metrics. These findings are relevant in the Nigerian context, where the "publish or perish" culture intensifies pressure on academic staff seeking promotion.

Conversely, self-directedness a personality trait defined by responsibility, goal orientation, and resourcefulness has been identified as a protective factor against psychological distress. It encompasses self-discipline, resourcefulness, and confidence. Liu, et al (2021) reported that self-directedness fosters academic resilience, enabling individuals to maintain a positive outlook and stay focused even under pressure. Their findings suggest that self-directed individuals are better equipped to manage promotion-related challenges and expectations,

potentially buffering them from high levels of anxiety. In a longitudinal study, **Yildirim and Akinci (2019)** found that self-directedness was negatively correlated with anxiety and emotional exhaustion among university lecturers. The researchers concluded that self-directed individuals tend to be more goal-oriented and adaptive in high-stakes work environments, such as those involving promotion criteria. Thus, empirical evidence supports **anegative relationship between self-directedness and promotion anxiety** and **apositive relationship between harm avoidance and promotion anxiety**, suggesting that personality traits play a crucial role in shaping emotional responses to academic career progression.

The Composite and Relative Contribution of Coping Styles (Problem-Focused and Avoidance) to the Prediction of Promotion Anxiety

Alongside personality traits, coping styles significantly influence how individuals manage stress and anxiety. Coping styles are behavioural and cognitive strategies individuals use to manage stress and pressure. In the academic environment, coping strategies are essential for navigating promotion-related stressors such as performance reviews, administrative delays, and publication expectations. Two predominant coping styles are problem-focused coping and avoidance coping. Problem-focused coping involves directly addressing the source of stress through planning, seeking solutions, and taking action. According to Chen et al (2020), this coping style is associated with lower psychological distress and improved academic performance. Similarly, Liu et al. (2021) reported that lecturers who used problem-focused coping mechanisms experienced lower anxiety and greater job satisfaction, even in competitive academic environments. In contrast, avoidance coping involves psychological withdrawal, denial, distraction, or disengagement. It is considered maladaptive in high-demand professional settings. Habib et al (2022) investigated occupational stress among Nigerian university lecturers and found that those who frequently employed avoidance coping reported significantly higher anxiety and emotional burnout. Their findings emphasize that avoidance coping contributes to psychological vulnerability, especially during promotion cycles.

Furthermore, Bello et al (2022) found that avoidance coping not only predicted general anxiety but also moderated the relationship between job stressors and intention to quit the profession among academic staff. This underlines the critical need for academic staff to adopt proactive and problem-solving approaches when facing promotion stressors. Studies also

suggest that coping styles do not operate in isolation but interact with personality traits to influence outcomes like anxiety. For instance, Yildirimet al (2019) reported that problem-focused coping significantly buffered the impact of low self-directedness on anxiety, while avoidance coping exacerbated the effects of high harm avoidance. Taken together, these findings indicate that coping styles make both composite and relative contributions to the prediction of promotion anxiety, with problem-focused coping reducing anxiety and avoidance coping increasing it.

Statement of the Problem

Promotion is intended to be a motivating and rewarding process in the academic profession. However, among academic staff in universities in Cross River State, the process is increasingly seen as a source of psychological distress rather than professional fulfillment. Despite the strategic importance of academic promotion in enhancing the quality of university education, there is growing concern about the emotional and psychological toll it takes on lecturers. Academic staff are often subjected to intense pressure to meet promotion benchmarks especially in the areas of research publication, postgraduate supervision, and international visibility. This pressure has led to increased levels of stress and emotional burnout, particularly among early-career and mid-level academics. While institutional challenges such as funding, leadership style, and promotion bureaucracy have received attention in prior studies, less emphasis has been placed on individual-level psychological variables like personality traits and coping styles, which may either buffer or intensify the experience of promotion anxiety.

Given the ongoing mental health discourse in academia and the strategic importance of staff promotion to institutional goals, it is crucial to identify psychological predictors of promotion anxiety. This study, therefore, seeks to bridge this gap by exploring how specific personality traits and coping styles contribute to promotion anxiety among academic staff in Cross River State.

Objectives of the Study

The main objective of this study is to investigate the extent to which personality traits (specifically harm avoidance and self-directedness) and coping styles (problem-focused and

avoidance coping) predict promotion anxiety among academic staff in selected universities in Cross River State. The following objectives were considered for the study:

- i To determine the relationship between personality traits (harm avoidance and self-directedness) and promotion anxiety among academic staff in universities in Cross River State?
- ii To determine the composite and relative contribution of coping styles (problem-focused and avoidance coping styles) to the prediction of promotion anxiety among academic staff in universities in Cross River State?

Research Questions

- iii What is the nature of the relationship between personality traits (harm avoidance and self-directedness) and promotion anxiety among academic staff in universities in Cross River State?
- iv What is the composite and relative contribution of coping styles (problem-focused and avoidance coping styles) to the prediction of promotion anxiety among academic staff in universities in Cross River State?

Statement of Hypotheses

Two null hypotheses were formulated to guide the study.

- i There is no significant relationship between personality traits (harm avoidance and self directedness) variables and promotion anxiety.
- ii There is no significant composite and relative contribution of coping styles (problem focused avoidance coping style) variables on promotion anxiety.

Methodology

The study utilized a correlation design which describes the degree to which two or more quantitative variables are related. The research was conducted in two universities: the University of Calabar and Cross River State of University of Science and Technology. The choice of these universities was based on the fact that academic staff were promoted on regular basis and are more likely to experience anxiety during the preparation for promotion.

The population of these universities was nine hundred and twenty (921) academic staff. A multi-stage approach was used to select the sample and a total of 602 respondents were eventually selected; 468 from University of Calabar and 134 from Cross River State University of Science and Technology. Three instruments from three researchers were modified and adopted for the study. The questionnaire was titled "Academic Staff Personality and Anxiety Disposition Scale" and was used to collect data. It was a structured questionnaire with 60 items and respondents were to provide responses on a four-point Likert scale of definitely false (DF), probably false (PF), probably true (PT) and definitely true (DT). For the purpose of coding, all positive worded items were assigned 1, 2, 3 and 4; while negative items had values in reverse order of 4, 3, 2, 1 assigned to them. Data collected were analysed using Pearson Product Correlation Co-efficient and Multiple Regression Analysis.

Result

Table 1: Mean and standard deviations of Personality Traits, Coping Styles, and Promotion Anxiety

Variables	No. of Items	Mean	SD
Harm Avoidance Trait	10	27.37	3.318
Self-Directedness	10	16.52	1.933
Problem-Focused Coping	10	16.09	2.355
Avoidance Coping Style	10	13.63	2.128
Promotion Anxiety	13	44.15	5.294

From the table above, academic staff recorded a relatively high average in harm avoidance ($M = 27.37$) and moderate scores in self-directedness and coping styles. The mean score for promotion anxiety ($M = 44.15$) indicates a considerable level of anxiety experienced by respondents, with moderate variation ($SD = 5.294$).

Hypothesis one

There is no significant relationship between personality traits (harm avoidance and self-directedness) and promotion anxiety among academic staff in universities in Cross River State.

Table 2: Pearson Correlation between Personality Traits and Promotion Anxiety

Variables	\bar{X}	SD	r	p-value
Harm Avoidance Trait	27.37	3.318	.553	.000*
Self-Directedness	15.84	1.40	-.325	.000*

*p < .05 (statistically significant)

The result indicates a significant **positive relationship** between harm avoidance and promotion anxiety ($r = .553$, $p < .05$), and a significant **negative relationship** between self-directedness and promotion anxiety ($r = -.325$, $p < .05$). Therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected.

Hypothesis two

There is no significant composite and relative contribution of coping styles (problem-focused and avoidance coping styles) to promotion anxiety among academic staff in universities in Cross River State.

Table 3: Pearson Correlation between Coping Styles and Promotion Anxiety

Variables	\bar{X}	SD	r	p-value
Problem-Focused Coping	16.09	2.355	-.371	.000*
Avoidance Coping Style	13.63	2.128	.287	.000*

*Significant at $p < .05$

Table 4: Summary of Multiple Regression Analysis

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p-value	R ²
Regression	2738.73	2	1369.36	39.09	.000*	.171
Residual	13263.73	568	23.35			
Total	16002.46	570				

The multiple correlation coefficient ($R = .414$) shows a moderate relationship between the two coping styles and promotion anxiety. The R^2 value of .171 indicates that 17.1% of the variance in promotion anxiety is explained by the coping styles. The result is significant ($F(2,568) = 39.09$, $p < .05$), so the null hypothesis is rejected.

Table 5: Regression Coefficients of Coping Styles

Variables	B	SE	Beta	t	p-value
Constant	51.552	2.563		20.111	.000
Problem-Focused Coping	-.253	.205	-.112	-1.234	.218
Avoidance Coping Style	.384	.104	.154	3.693	.000*

*Significant at $p < .05$

Avoidance coping style significantly predicts promotion anxiety ($\beta = 0.154$, $p < .05$). Problem-focused style did not significantly predict promotion anxiety when examined independently ($p = .218$). Furthermore, only **avoidance coping style** significantly predicted promotion anxiety ($t = 3.693$, $p < .05$). **Problem-focused coping** did not significantly predict promotion anxiety when considered in the model ($p = .218$).

Discussion of Findings

Relationship between Personality Traits and Promotion Anxiety

What is the nature of the relationship between personality traits (harm avoidance and self-directedness) and promotion anxiety among academic staff in universities in Cross River State? The result of the Pearson Product Moment Correlation analysis revealed a significant positive relationship between harm avoidance personality trait and promotion anxiety ($r = .553$, $p < .05$). Conversely, a significant negative relationship was found between self-directedness and promotion anxiety ($r = -.325$, $p < .05$). This implies that academic staff with higher levels of harm avoidance tend to experience higher levels of anxiety about promotion, likely due to their tendency to worry, fear rejection, or be pessimistic. On the other hand, those with high self-directedness who are typically self-regulated, purposeful, and confident experience less promotion-related anxiety. This supports previous findings by Berkel (2009), Yen et al. (2015), and Ball et al. (2012), which linked harm avoidance to heightened psychological distress and anxiety. Conversely, self-directedness showed a significant negative correlation with promotion anxiety, indicating that lecturers who exhibit high self-control and goal-orientation tend to have lower anxiety regarding promotion. Although this contradicts some earlier findings that reported mixed outcomes (e.g., Laidlaw et al., 2005;

Alminhana et al., 2017), it supports Cloninger et al. (1993) who found high self-directedness is associated with better mental health.

The null hypothesis which stated that, “there is no significant relationship between personality traits (harm avoidance and self-directedness) and promotion anxiety” was rejected, confirming that personality traits significantly relate to promotion anxiety.

Predictive role of Coping Styles on Promotion Anxiety

What is the composite and relative contribution of coping styles (problem-focused and avoidance coping styles) to the prediction of promotion anxiety among academic staff in universities in Cross River State? Multiple regression analysis revealed that coping styles jointly contributed significantly to promotion anxiety ($R = .414$; $R^2 = .171$; $F(3, 568) = 39.094$; $p < .05$), meaning that coping styles explained 17.1% of the variance in promotion anxiety. Specifically; avoidance coping style had a significant positive effect ($\beta = 0.154$, $p < .05$). Also, problem-focused coping style had a negative but non-significant effect ($\beta = -0.112$, $p > .05$). This shows that lecturers who rely on avoidance coping mechanisms (e.g., procrastination, denial, emotional withdrawal) are more prone to promotion anxiety. In contrast, those who employ problem-focused strategies (e.g., planning, seeking support, setting goals) tend to experience lower anxiety, although this coping style did not significantly predict promotion anxiety when considered alone. This aligns with prior studies (e.g., Boyes, 2013; Ayers et al., 2010; Jacobson & Newman, 2010; Ryan, 2013 and Viliz et al. (2017) which found avoidance coping to be a maladaptive response to stress and anxiety.

The null hypothesis which stated that, “there is no significant composite and relative contribution of coping styles (problem-focused and avoidance coping) to promotion anxiety” was also rejected, indicating a significant predictive relationship between coping styles and promotion anxiety.

Conclusion

This study has offered valuable insights into how specific personality traits and coping styles influence promotion anxiety among academic staff in universities in Cross River State. The findings demonstrate that promotion anxiety is not merely an administrative or procedural issue but a deeply personal and psychological experience influenced by

individual traits and behavioural responses. The results established that harm avoidance characterized by fear, pessimism, and excessive worry is positively linked to heightened promotion anxiety. Conversely, self-directedness, a trait associated with personal initiative, discipline, and self-confidence, was negatively related to anxiety, suggesting its protective role against emotional distress in promotion-related contexts.

Furthermore, the study revealed that coping styles, particularly avoidance coping, significantly predict promotion anxiety. Academic staff who adopt avoidance behaviours when facing promotion challenges are more likely to experience stress and psychological discomfort. Although problem-focused coping showed a trend toward reducing anxiety, it did not have a statistically significant standalone impact in this study. These findings underscore the importance of a holistic approach to academic staff welfare and promotion processes one that goes beyond qualifications and performance metrics to include emotional preparedness, coping strategies, and personality support systems. Institutions must recognize that for academic productivity and progression to thrive, mental well-being and personality alignment with institutional expectations must be prioritized.

In conclusion, the study provides strong empirical evidence that personality traits and coping mechanisms are essential psychological correlates of promotion anxiety. As such, university policies and staff development programs must be deliberately designed to promote self-awareness, emotional resilience, and proactive coping among lecturers, thereby fostering not only academic excellence but also psychological well-being within the university system.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, it was recommended as follow:

1. Interventions aimed at reducing promotion anxiety should focus on decreasing harm avoidance and enhancing self-directedness to promote resilience and goal-oriented behavior.
2. Efforts to reduce promotion anxiety should address the relative contribution of coping styles by encouraging problem-focused strategies and minimizing reliance on avoid

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