

Perceived academic challenges of Jewish and Arab undergraduates during the first wave of COVID-19

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This study examined differences between Arab and Jewish undergraduate students in their perceived academic challenges, COVID-19-related concerns, perceived social support and trust in the university and the government. It also examined factors associated with perceived academic challenges and the moderating role of trust in the university in the associations between COVID-19-related concerns and perceived academic challenges. The sample consisted of 2751 students: 2291 (83%) Jewish, 398 (15%) Arab and 61 (2%) ‘other’. Arab students reported higher COVID-19-related concerns and perceived academic challenges, and lower levels of perceived social support and trust in university and government than did Jewish students. Both Jewish and Arab students identified COVID-19-related concerns as a stress-vulnerability factor for perceived academic challenges, whereas perceived social support and trust in the university were identified as resources for perceived academic challenges. No support was found for the role of trust in government in the face of perceived academic challenges nor for the moderating role of trust in the university in the associations between COVID-19-related concerns and perceived academic challenges. In conclusion, the need of Arab students for emotional and academic support needs to be acknowledged as part of the efforts to promote academic success during the pandemic.

Keywords: COVID-19; University student; Ethnic minority; Perceived academic challenges; Arab students.

At the beginning of 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic took the world by storm, resulting in a period of stress for all humanity. As of 11 April 2021, in a population of 9 million, Israel has recorded over 900,000 confirmed cases and a death toll of over 6560 (State of Israel Ministry of Health, 2021). University students’ lives underwent many changes during the pandemic. They had to adjust quickly to a new online platform for their studies and to the lack of face-to-face peer social interaction (Schiff et al., 2021).

The Arab minority in Israel is divided into three religious groups: Muslims, Christians and Druze. Together, they constitute 21% of the population and form the Arab ethnic group, distinct from the Jewish one. The Arab minority tends to suffer from a deficit of resources, relative to the Jewish population mostly owing to lower economic status and level of education (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2019). Of 208,416 undergraduate students in higher education institutions in Israel in 2020–2021, 19.3% were Arabs (Council for Higher Education

Israel, 2020). Arab students tend to be exposed to higher academic pressures than Jewish students (Tahachu et al., 2020). Primary and post-primary educational systems in Israel are separate for Arabs and Jews. Therefore, when Arabs enrol in post-secondary institutions, they may face language barriers because the language of instruction in Israeli academic institutions is Hebrew. Students in higher education in Israel are also expected to read English fluently, another barrier for many Arab students (Tahachu et al., 2020).

Arab students may face additional pressure from political conditions. In Israel, Arab citizens are exempt from military service, which may contribute to a gap in skills and age between students in the two groups (Guterman & Gill, 2021). With the abrupt shift to remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, accumulating academic challenges may have increased for Arab students. During the pandemic, Arab students proceeded with their academic studies in a shared family space and used shared

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equipment, with limited Internet infrastructure and digital capabilities, all of which may have impaired the quality of their learning (Meler, 2021).

Conservation of resources theory

According to the conservation of resources theory (COR), a stressful event involves loss of physical, psychological, social and economic resources or a threat of such loss (Hobfoll, 1989). Thus, coping with a stressful event depends on the combination of loss of certain resources and gain of others. Levels of distress and functional difficulties are higher for those who reach stressful circumstances with fewer resources (Hobfoll, 1989; Hobfoll et al., 2006). These deficits are associated with difficulties in functioning, which are likely to be disproportionately large for members of minorities.

Arab students in Israel tend to have fewer resources than Jewish students (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2019). Therefore, although all university students may have experienced challenges because of the pandemic, Arab students may have experienced the challenges more intensively (Tahachu et al., 2020). In this study, we investigated COVID-19-related concerns as a stress-vulnerability factor in the face of perceived academic challenges, perceived social support and trust in the university and in the government, which were viewed as resources.

COVID-19-related concerns and perceived academic challenges

The present research defined COVID-19-related concerns as a combination of fear and anxiety including worries about various aspects of the pandemic, such as the uncertainty related to the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, the absence of a vaccine (a key concern in the first wave of the outbreak), the uncertainty of how the virus is spread, the contagion rate and the lack of clarity regarding protective measures (Schiff et al., 2021; Tandoc Jr & Lee, 2020).

Although the authors have been addressing the levels of COVID-19-related concerns of Israeli students (Schiff et al., 2021), the associations with perceived academic challenges are yet unknown. High levels of anxiety symptoms have been reported in Israeli college students during the pandemic (Ochnik et al., 2021). Moreover, there is evidence of positive associations between psychological symptoms and academic stress in regular times, including vulnerability to dropping out of college (e.g., Lipson & Eisenberg, 2018). Therefore, it is expected that COVID-19-related concerns would also be related to perceived academic challenges. Arab college students report a higher level of distress symptoms than their Jewish peers do (Kimhi et al., 2017). Thus, during the COVID-19 epidemic, Arab students may also experience

higher levels of concern than their Jewish peers do. The difference between Arab and Jewish students in the strength of these associations remains an open question.

Perceived social support and perceived academic challenges

Perceived social support, an important resource according to COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989), is considered a protective factor against psychological distress and malfunctioning during stressful events. Social support has been known to be a central protective factor that can mitigate the level of academic stress during regular times (Marhamah & Binti Hamzah, 2017) and during the pandemic (Pajarianto et al., 2020). In the present research, we expected a higher level of perceived social support to be associated with lower perceived academic challenges. There is limited evidence concerning ethnic differences in perceived social support by students in Israel. Abu-Kaf et al. (2019), for example, found a lower level of perceived social support among Bedouin students in the south of Israel than among their Jewish peers. These findings should be interpreted with caution, although they suggest that Arab students in general may experience lower social support than their Jewish counterparts.

Trust and perceived academic challenges

Trust in the university and government may serve as an additional resource in the current study. Trust in the university and government were found to be positively associated with levels of mental wellbeing in a sample of 467 UK university students during the pandemic (Defeyter et al., 2021). Note that ethnic disparities, especially differences between Arab and Jewish were found in the level of trust in the central government and its institutions. Arab students viewed the Israeli government with scepticism, as was found in a sample of 5000 eighth and ninth graders from 48 middle schools (Resh & Sabbagh, 2014). The lack of trust can be attributed to discrimination on the part of the government (Resh & Sabbagh, 2014). Differences were found in the levels of trust in different authorities. In an Israeli study, students' trust in the university was higher than their trust in government, in the way the COVID-19 crisis was managed (Schiff et al., 2022). This was true for both the majority and minority groups. Therefore, Arab students may have more trust in the university than in the government.

Trust in the university authority may attenuate the associations between COVID-19-related concerns and perceived academic challenges, although, to our best knowledge, such a moderation effect has not been tested before in the context of COVID-19. The potential moderating effect may be similar in both ethnic groups.

Background variables may be related to students' perceived academic challenges. In the course of the pandemic, studies revealed that females and young people have a higher likelihood of experiencing high levels of mental distress (Pieh et al., 2020). Health condition may also be related to psychological symptoms and stress reaction; individuals in poorer health have been reported to show higher levels of mental distress (Özdin & Bayrak Özdin, 2020). These background variables may be also related to perceived academic challenges. Therefore, in the present study, we controlled for gender, age and state of health.

In sum, the present study applied the formulation of the COR theory to examine ethnic differences between Arab and Jewish students in the level of perceived academic challenges, COVID-19-related concerns, perceived social support and trust in the university and in government in a sample of Arab and Jewish undergraduates during the first wave of the pandemic in Israel. The study also examined the role of COVID-19-related concerns as a stress-vulnerability factor; the three resources of perceived social support; trust in the university and in government in facing perceived academic challenges, and the moderating role of trust in the university in the associations of COVID-19-related concerns with perceived academic challenges.

H1: Arab students will report higher perceived academic challenges and COVID-19-related concerns than will Jewish students.

H2: Arab students will report lower perceived social support than will Jewish students.

H3: Arab students will report lower trust in government than will Jewish students.

H4: A positive association will be found between students' COVID-19-related concerns and their perceived academic challenges, so that the higher the COVID-19-related concerns, the higher the students' perceived academic challenges.

H5: COVID-19-related concerns, perceived social support and trust in the university and the government will predict perceived academic challenges after controlling for background and health variables.

In the absence of previous research on which to rely, we addressed the following research questions:

RQ1: Is there a difference in the level of trust in the university between the two groups?

RQ2: Does trust in university moderate the relations between COVID-19-related concerns and perceived academic challenges, so that the relation between the two

may be weaker for students with a higher level of trust in the university.

METHOD

Sample

The study population included all 13,212 undergraduate students of one leading university in Israel, 2100 of whom were Arab students (15.9%). A total of 2751 (20.8%) students completed the questionnaire, of whom 2291 (83%) defined themselves as Jewish, 398 (15%) as Arab and 61 (2%) as 'other'. The mean age was 25.90 ($SD = 4.52$) years for Jewish students and 22.39 ($SD = 3.49$) years for Arab students. Among Jewish students, 854 (40.3%) defined themselves as male, 1255 (59.3%) as female and 10 (0.5%) as other. Among Arab students, 81 (21.5%), 294 (78.2%) and 1 (0.3%) defined themselves as male, female or 'other', respectively. Jewish students reported a better physical state of health than did their Arab counterparts, with 90.3% of the Jewish students and 84.5% of Arab students reporting 'good' or 'very good' physical health.

Measurements

The measurement tools were specially constructed to assess the COVID-19 experiences of students. The scales were initially developed in Hebrew, then translated into Arabic. The translation was tested and confirmed by three native speakers of Arabic who were also fluent in Hebrew. Arab students could choose between answering the Hebrew or the Arabic version.

Dependent variable

Perceived academic challenges

We measured perceived academic challenges using five items, of which two asked about difficulties in: 'Dealing with learning assignments' and 'Using online learning'. Answers were provided on a 4-point scale ranging from 0 = 'Not at all' to 3 = 'To a great extent'. Three additional questions, suitable equipment for distance learning', 'difficulty learning from home (small children, crowded apartment, etc.)', and 'emotional availability to learning', were answered on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 = 'Not at all' to 5 = 'Very much'. Inter-item reliability (Cronbach's α) was 0.73 and 0.72 for the Hebrew and Arabic scales, respectively. We constructed a composite score of perceived academic challenges by averaging all five items (after appropriate reverse scaling), a higher score indicating higher perceived academic challenges.

Independent variable

Ethnicity

We measured ethnicity by one item. Students were asked to define themselves as Jewish, Arab or other. We excluded the data of participants who defined themselves as ‘other’ (2%).

Students’ COVID-19-related concerns

Seven potential types of concern were presented, and students were asked to indicate how much each is a source of concern for them. For example: How worried were they about ‘a situation in which everyone can infect you with the virus’? or about the fact that ‘it was not clear when the state of emergency would end’ (Schiff et al., 2021). Inter-item reliability (Cronbach’s α) was 0.84 and 0.83 for the Hebrew and Arabic scales, respectively. We constructed a composite score of concerns by averaging all seven items. A higher score indicates a greater degree of concern.

Perceived social support

We measured perceived social support by one question: How much support did you receive from the environment (friends, online friends, parents, spouses, other family members)? Responses were provided on a scale ranging from 1 to 10, a higher score indicating a greater degree of perceived social support.

Trust in the way the university and the government managed the COVID-19 crisis

We examined trust in both authorities based on one question each: ‘To what extent do you support the way the university has dealt with the COVID-19 crisis so far’? and ‘To what extent do you support the way the government has dealt with the COVID-19 crisis so far’? Responses were provided on a scale ranging from 1 to 10, a higher score indicating a greater degree of trust.

Background variables included gender, age and state of health. We examined the students’ state of health by a validated measure of self-rated health (SRH; DeSalvo et al., 2006): we asked students to report their state of health on a scale ranging from 1 = ‘Very good’ to 5 = ‘Very bad’.

Data collection and ethical considerations

Data collection took place between 23 March and 26 April 2020. The online research questionnaire in Hebrew and Arabic was prepared using the Qualtrics program. After receiving approval from the Ethics Committee of the authors’ university, the link to the online questionnaire

in Hebrew was forwarded in a university email by the office of the Dean of Students to each of the authors’ students. The questionnaire in Arabic was distributed by the head of the Diversity Office of the university to all the Arab students. The questionnaire was anonymous. Three reminders were sent to students during the data collection period. Ethical considerations were taken into account. First, participation was consensual, and students could stop at any time if they changed their mind about participating. Second, students were given the phone number of the psychological counselling services in case they needed support.

Data analysis

The analyses were conducted using SPSS Statistics Version 27. First, we conducted a set of descriptive analyses, separately for Arab and Jewish students. We performed chi-squared tests for separate items of the scale, or analysis of covariance (ANCOVA), with ethnicity as an independent variable, and gender, age and health status as covariates. Second, we calculated Pearson correlations between the study variables and the level of perceived academic challenges, separately for Jewish and Arab students. Third, we performed multiple hierarchical regressions to investigate how COVID-19-related concerns, perceived social support and trust in the university and the government predicted perceived academic challenges among Arab and Jewish students separately. We included gender, age and health status in the multiple regression analyses as control variables.

Finally, we examined the moderating role of trust in the university on the relationship between COVID-19-related concerns and perceived academic challenges using the Process Macro for SPSS (Hayes, 2017).

RESULTS

Differences by ethnicity

The means and standard deviations of the study variables for Jewish and Arab students are presented separately in Table 1.

In support of Hypothesis H1, findings show that although both groups were struggling with perceived academic challenges during the epidemic, Arab students struggled more than did Jewish students, $F(1, 2749) = 23.34, p < .001$ for the total scale. This was apparent mainly with respect to the following items of the scale: suitable equipment for distance learning, difficulty in learning from home (because of small children, crowded apartment, etc.); and emotional availability for learning, with 13.9%, 57% and 51.3% of Arab students reporting ‘Great’ or ‘Very great’ difficulty on these items, respectively, compared to 4.8% ($\chi^2(4) = 160.24,$

TABLE 1
Descriptive statistics of study variables in both ethnic groups

	Jewish students			Arab students		
	Total M(SD)	Male M(SD)	Female M(SD)	Total M(SD)	Male M(SD)	Female M(SD)
<i>Depended variables</i>						
Perceived academic challenges	2.25 (0.80)	2.14 (0.81)	2.31 (0.77)	2.52 (0.82)	2.52 (0.83)	2.51 (0.81)
<i>Control variables</i>						
Health status	4.45 (0.70)	4.49 (0.65)	4.41 (0.72)	4.28 (0.82)	4.30 (0.79)	4.26 (0.82)
<i>Independent variables</i>						
COVID-19-related concerns	3.31 (0.77)	3.08 (0.78)	3.46 (0.72)	3.92 (0.72)	3.83 (0.71)	3.93 (0.72)
Perceived social support	7.67 (2.29)	7.36 (2.47)	7.88 (2.13)	6.81 (2.50)	6.50 (2.85)	6.90 (2.39)
Trust in university	7.13 (2.18)	7.08 (2.25)	7.17 (2.13)	6.13 (2.41)	6.28 (2.10)	6.08 (2.50)
Trust in government	6.28 (2.17)	6.26 (2.29)	6.30 (2.07)	4.47 (2.40)	4.73 (2.45)	4.35 (2.39)

Note: Items referring to perceived academic challenges and COVID-19-related concerns were measured on a scale from 1 to 5, higher scores indicating higher perceived challenges/concerns. Perceived social support, trust in university and trust in government were measured on a scale ranging from 1 to 10, higher scores indicating a greater degree of each resource. Health status measured on a scale from 1 to 5, higher scores indicating poorer health.

$p < .001$), 31.5% ($\chi^2(4) = 121.40, p < .001$) and 35.7% ($\chi^2(4) = 55.51, p < .001$) of Jewish students.

Arab students also reported higher levels of COVID-19-related concerns than did Jewish students, $F(1, 2750) = 137.17, p < .001$ for the total scale. On individual items, 61.9% of Arab students, compared to 40.1% of their Jewish peers, reported ‘Great’ or ‘Very great’ concern about ‘a situation in which everyone can infect them with the virus’, ($\chi^2(4) = 171.75, p < .001$); 74.6% compared to 43.3% reported ‘Great’ or ‘Very great’ concern about ‘the growing percentage of the infection in the country’ ($\chi^2(4) = 185.36, p < .001$); 78.2% compared to 51.5% reported ‘Great’ or ‘Very great’ concern about ‘the rapid spread of the virus in the world’ ($\chi^2(4) = 169.91, p < .001$); 63.3% compared to 51.7% reported ‘Great’ or ‘Very great’ concern about ‘the restrictions imposed on the daily life because of the virus’ ($\chi^2(4) = 45.87, p < .001$); 69.5% compared to 38.4% reported ‘Great’ or ‘Very great’ concern about ‘the situation that there is still no vaccine for the virus’ ($\chi^2(4) = 202.42, p < .001$); 45.7% compared to 27.4% reported ‘Great’ or ‘Very great’ concern about the fact ‘that protective measures are not effective enough’ ($\chi^2(4) = 89.55, p < .001$); and 77.9% compared to 72.5% reported ‘Great’ or ‘Very great’ concern about the fact

that ‘it was not clear when the state of emergency would end’ ($\chi^2(4) = 34.30, p < .001$), respectively.

Jewish students reported a significantly higher level of perceived social support, $F(1, 2744) = 48.06, p < .001$, higher level of trust in government, $F(1, 2739) = 248.78, p < .001$ and higher level of trust in the university authorities than did their Arab counterparts, $F(1, 2734) = 55.61, p < .001$.

Associations between study variables

The results of the Pearson correlations between the study variables are shown in Table 2. In accordance with Hypothesis H3, higher COVID-19-related concerns were related to higher perceived academic challenges both for Jewish ($r = .30, p < .01$) and for Arab students ($r = .31, p < .01$). Perceived social support was significantly negatively associated with perceived academic challenges in both the Jewish ($r = -.24, p < .01$) and Arab ($r = -.25, p < .01$) groups. Trust in the university was weakly negatively associated with COVID-19-related concerns for Jewish ($r = -.12, p < .01$) and Arab ($r = -.10, p < .05$) students, and moderately associated with perceived academic challenges for Jewish ($r = -.38, p < .01$) and Arab ($r = -.44, p < .01$) students. Trust in government was

TABLE 2
Pearson correlation between the study variables

Variables	Jewish students					Arab students				
	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
1. Perceived Academic challenges	—					—				
2. COVID-19-related concerns	.30**	—				.31**	—			
3. Perceived social support	-.24**	-.07**	—			-.25**	-.05	—		
4. Trust in university	-.38**	-.12**	.18**	—		-.44**	-.10*	.29**	—	
5. Trust in government	-.08**	-.04	.16**	.27**	—	-.25**	-.12*	.20**	.35**	—

Note: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

negatively associated with COVID-19-related concerns in the Arab sample ($r = -.12, p < .05$) but not in the Jewish one ($r = -.04, p > .05$). Although trust in government was only weakly associated with perceived academic challenges for Jewish students ($r = -.08, p < .01$), it was more strongly associated for Arab students ($r = -.25, p < .01$).

Predictors of perceived academic challenges

Table 3 shows a summary of hierarchical regression analyses. Background variables explained only 5% of the variance both for Jewish ($F(3, 2234) = 42.66, p < .001$) and for Arab ($F(3, 373) = 5.79, p < .001$) students. COVID-19-related concerns added 7% to the explained variance for the Jewish students, $F(4, 2233) = 77.36, p < .001$, and 8% for Arab students, $F(4, 372) = 13.62, p < .001$. The resources of perceived social support, trust in the university and trust in government policy regarding the COVID-19 pandemic added an additional 13% of the variance for Jewish students, $F(7, 2230) = 107.73, p < .001$, and 16% for Arab students, $F(7, 369) = 21.83, p < .001$. The total model explained 25% and 28% of the variance for Jewish and Arab students, respectively.

Better perceived health status was significantly associated with lower levels of perceived academic challenges among Jewish ($\beta = -.21, p < .01$) and Arab ($\beta = -.15, p < .01$) students. As we expected, there was a positive main effect of COVID-related concerns on perceived academic challenges both for Jewish ($\beta = .23, p < .01$) and for Arab ($\beta = .26, p < .01$) students. As hypothesized, there was also a negative main effect of perceived social support on perceived academic challenges for Jewish ($\beta = -.15, p < .01$) and for Arab ($\beta = -.11, p < .05$) students. The same was true about trust in the university both for Jewish ($\beta = -.33, p < .01$) and Arab ($\beta = -.34, p < .01$) students.

Our findings revealed that for Arab students, there was no main effect of trust in government on perceived academic challenges, whereas for Jewish students, the relationship was in the opposite direction of our hypothesis: greater trust was associated with more challenges.

Moderation model

The Process Macro for SPSS (Hayes, 2017) showed no significant interaction effect of trust in the university and COVID-19-related concerns on perceived academic challenges (coefficient = .009, $SE = .005, p = .07, 95\% CI = -.001-.020$).

DISCUSSION

According to our results, Arab students showed higher levels of perceived academic challenges than did Jewish students. These differences may be understood in light

TABLE 3 Summary of hierarchical regression analysis of variables predicting perceived academic challenges for Jewish ($N = 2291$) and Arab ($N = 398$) students

Variables	Jewish students						Arab students					
	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	B	β	B	β	B	β	B	β	B	β	B	β
Gender	.15	.09***	.05	.03	.11	.07***	.02	.01	-.01	-.00	-.01	-.01
Health status	-.24	-.21***	-.18	-.16***	-.13	-.11***	-.19	-.19***	-.14	-.14**	-.08	-.10
Age	.00	.01	.00	.01	.00	.04	-.03	-.11	-.02	-.10*	-.02	-.11*
COVID-19-related concerns			.28	.27***	.23	.23***			.33	.29***	.29	.26***
Perceived social support					-.05	-.15***					-.04	-.11*
Trust in university					-.12	-.33***					-.12	-.35***
Trust in government					.02	.05***					-.02	-.06
R^2		.05		.12		.25		.05		.13		.29
F for change in R^2		42.67***		171.68***		130.31***		5.80***		35.52***		28.72***

Note: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

of the main postulates of the COR theory: people who lack resources are most vulnerable to additional losses in stressful circumstances (Hobfoll, 1989; Hobfoll et al., 2006). Overall, Arab students were found to have fewer academic resources, as manifested in their difficulties with Hebrew and English (Tahachu et al., 2020). During the pandemic, Arab students often had to cope with the lack of a proper learning environment at home because of crowded households, a shortage of private spaces, limited digital resources and poor Wi-Fi infrastructure (Meler, 2021). An additional explanation may have to do with the sample characteristics: 78.2% of the Arab group was female, compared to 59.3% of the Jewish group. Female Arab students reported on the burden of meeting their traditional gender-related obligations alongside distance learning during the pandemic (Meler, 2021), which may have added another tier to their perceived academic challenges.

Arab students also displayed higher levels of COVID-19-related concerns. This is consistent with previous findings showing that the Arab population in Israel, in general, faced unique and specific challenges in coping with the pandemic, including crowded living conditions that precluded observing the social distancing mandates, access to pertinent information and updates and adequate access to healthcare and testing centres (Waitzberg et al., 2020). Another possible source for the differences in the level of COVID-19-related concerns between the two groups may lie in the characteristics of the sample, the majority of which was female. Peh et al. (2020) found a higher level of psychological distress in females than in males during the epidemic.

Regarding the different resources examined by this study, Jewish students felt the presence of support to a higher degree than their Arab peers did. The lower level of perceived social support of Arab students can be attributed to the tendency of Arab students to refrain from revealing personal matters (Pines & Zaidman, 2003). This tendency is potentially associated with the perception of availability of help.

Findings revealed also that both Arabs and Jews expressed greater trust in university policy than in government regarding the management of the COVID-19 crisis. These results are consistent with other studies (Schiff et al., 2022). Our finding showed that Jewish students trusted the government more than Arab students did. A possible explanation for the lower level of trust in government may be related to the growing suspicion in times of uncertainty that government decisions were not free from political interest (Gesser-Edelsburg, 2021). Arab students' mistrust of the Israeli government did not begin with COVID-19, but has deep roots in the complex relations between the Arab population in Israel and the government (Satran et al., 2021).

COVID-19-related concerns were positively associated with perceived academic challenges and identified as a stress-vulnerability factor. These findings expand existing evidence that high psychological distress is associated with greater academic challenges and academic dissatisfaction of college students (e.g., Lipson & Eisenberg, 2018). Thus, not only psychological distress in general, but also specific stress related to a global crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic may increase perceived academic challenges.

As expected, the personal resource of perceived social support predicted lower perceived academic challenges for the two ethnic groups. Generally, the academic scene is considered to be a source of stress (Pedrelli et al., 2015) that can intensify during emergencies like the COVID-19 crisis. Note that the situation at hand had unique characteristics which highlighted the particular importance of social support in academic life. Because of the pandemic, students were forced to remain at home and maintain social distancing from their wider social circle. These circumstances may be associated with increased academic stress and greater challenges facing students (Mosanya, 2021). Our findings confirmed perceived social support as an important resource in reducing perceived academic challenges during the pandemic for both Arab and Jewish students. These findings are consistent with COR theory, in which social support appears to be a significant resource in times of stress (Hobfoll et al., 2006).

Trust in the university appeared to be moderately associated with perceived academic challenges for both Jewish and Arab students. These findings are consistent with previous ones regarding the importance of trust in the university as a resource against stress during the pandemic (Defeyer et al., 2021), and in the present study, also as an additional resource against perceived academic challenges, although trust is not mentioned as a resource in the COR theory. The current findings support the COR theory by confirming the importance of a highly relevant resource during the pandemic: trust in the policy of the local authority.

We found a significant negative association in the bi-variable analysis between trust in government with perceived academic challenges, but it disappeared in the multivariate analysis. It seems that trust can turn into a double-edged sword during the pandemic. These findings point to the complexity of trust and its effect in certain situations. Trust in government and in the way it conducted the fight against the pandemic may also involve the cost of trust in the information provided about the pandemic by official authorities. Official authorities have emphasised the dangers of the COVID-19 virus as a national and world health threat, and people with higher trust in information resources perceived the virus as more dangerous than did those with lower trust (Entradas, 2021).

Thus, there may be variables inherent in trust in government that may be associated with higher perceived academic challenges for Jewish students. It is possible that trust in information resources is also positively related to perceived academic challenges.

Finally, although trust in the university was found to be an important resource for reducing perceived academic challenges, it did not moderate the relationship between COVID-19-related concerns and perceived academic challenges. It is possible that trust in the university to manage the crisis has a different effect depending on the need in question. Students may have various needs during a pandemic (e.g., emotional, academic and financial). Various aspects of trust may have different consequences on the relationship between COVID-19-related concerns and perceived academic challenges.

Limitations and future directions

Several limitations of the present study should be considered. First, it was based on a cross-sectional survey. Second, measurements were custom-tailored and therefore their validity has not yet been tested; moreover, some of them were general and single-item measures. Third, we did not measure the role of religiosity as a resource in perceived academic challenges. Finally, the study measured perceptions rather than actual academic achievement. Future research should examine academic achievements, trust in the university and perceived social support from a broader perspective that includes reference to their various components. Additional resources (economic and religious) should also be investigated.

CONCLUSIONS

Arab students, who comprise a minority of Israeli students, were found to be vulnerable to perceived academic challenges during the pandemic. It is therefore important to continue identifying the needs of students in general and of the Arab minority in particular, and to tailor the support provided to accommodate these needs. It is also necessary to raise awareness of the potential sources of help available at the university and to make them accessible. Given the social distancing and the online learning at the time this study was conducted, online social encounters may be an alternative to interpersonal interactions between students.

Based on our results, universities should pay attention to the potential effect of trust in the university on students' perceived academic challenges. Examining ways to build and strengthen trust in the university authorities is a crucial aspect in the efforts to maintain and enhance academic success during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

ETHICS STATEMENT

All procedures performed were in accordance with the ethical standards of the Hebrew University ethical committee and with the Helsinki Declaration.

INFORMED CONSENT

Informed consent was obtained from all students who participated in the study prior to their completion of the research questionnaires.

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