

PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTRESS AMONG UNEMPLOYED UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN PAKISTAN: A QUANTITATIVE STUDY

Original Article

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ABSTRACT

Background: Unemployment is a major psychosocial stressor linked to significant mental health challenges, particularly among youth. While global research has consistently highlighted the association between unemployment and psychological distress, there remains a notable lack of focus on unemployed university students in Pakistan. In a society with strong collectivistic values and economic constraints, the psychological impact of joblessness on students warrants deeper investigation to inform effective interventions and policy development.

Objective: The objective of this study was to examine the relationship between depression, anxiety, and stress among unemployed university students in Pakistan.

Methods: A cross-sectional correlational research design was adopted. A total of 208 unemployed university students, aged 18 to 35 years, were recruited through purposive sampling from various HEC-recognized institutions. Participants had to be unemployed for at least one year to meet the inclusion criteria. Psychological distress was measured using the Depression Anxiety Stress Scale-21 (DASS-21), a validated self-report instrument with high internal consistency ($\alpha = .88$ for depression, $.82$ for anxiety, and $.90$ for stress). Data were analyzed using SPSS v29, applying Pearson correlation and subgroup analyses including t-tests and ANOVA.

Results: The mean age of participants was 24.13 years ($SD = 4.37$); 33% were male and 67% were female. Education levels included 52% bachelor's, 30% master's, and 18% PhD students. Depression, anxiety, and stress scores were significantly and positively correlated ($r = .98$, $r = .99$, $r = .97$ respectively, $p < .01$). ANOVA revealed significant differences in psychological distress by education level ($p < .05$), but not by gender.

Conclusion: Findings underscore the need for policy reforms including government-sponsored internships, remote job access, parental psychoeducation, and mental health initiatives to address the emotional burden of unemployment among university students.

Keywords: Anxiety, Depression, Mental Health, Psychological Stress, Students, Unemployment, Universities.

INTRODUCTION

Unemployment, a condition where individuals actively seeking work remain without employment, is widely recognized as a vital indicator of economic health. While a low unemployment rate typically reflects a stable economy, elevated rates often signal systemic distress and socioeconomic vulnerability (1–3). Beyond economic implications, unemployment has been consistently associated with adverse psychological outcomes, including depression, anxiety, and stress. Depression is marked by persistent sadness, apathy, and, at times, suicidal ideation (4), whereas anxiety is characterized by excessive worry and physiological symptoms such as heart palpitations and breathlessness (5). Stress, meanwhile, is a heightened psychological state triggered by overwhelming demands or perceived threats, often manifesting as chronic mental tension (6). A robust body of longitudinal and meta-analytical research underscores the detrimental effects of unemployment on mental health, particularly among men and populations residing in socioeconomically disadvantaged regions (7). This association becomes more complex in the context of young adults, where unemployment coincides with an already transitional and psychologically sensitive life stage. Studies suggest that although causality may be multifactorial, unemployed youth are significantly more prone to psychological distress, particularly in the wake of national or regional economic crises (8,9). Social support has been identified as a mitigating factor, buffering the psychological toll of joblessness. In Pakistan, empirical data corroborates these patterns. For instance, a study conducted in Peshawar revealed higher distress levels among unemployed young individuals compared to their employed counterparts (10).

University students, who represent a unique subgroup of young adults, are particularly susceptible to mental health challenges due to academic, financial, and social pressures (11). These pressures are magnified in countries like Pakistan, where systemic unemployment and financial instability intersect with academic stress. Studies across Pakistan and internationally have shown alarmingly high prevalence rates of depression, anxiety, and stress among university students (12,13). Specifically, findings from Sialkot indicated that over three-quarters of students exhibited symptoms of psychological distress, with anxiety and stress being especially prominent (14). Moreover, socio-demographic factors—such as gender, parental education, and living conditions—have been shown to significantly influence students' mental health (15). In Malaysia and the UK, financial hardship and poor social integration have also been implicated in deteriorating psychological well-being and academic performance among students (16,17). Complementing these findings, a recent analysis of over 30,000 social media posts from Chinese graduates revealed a surge in expressions of emotional distress during periods of heightened unemployment, further emphasizing the global scale of this issue (18). Despite the growing literature on student mental health, the specific psychological consequences of unemployment among university students in Pakistan remain under-investigated. This gap is particularly pressing given the country's high youth unemployment rates and limited institutional mental health support. Financial hardship, in particular, appears to exacerbate symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress. Therefore, the objective of this study is to examine the relationship between unemployment and psychological health—specifically depression, anxiety, and stress—among university students in Pakistan, aiming to fill the existing research void and inform evidence-based student welfare and policy strategies.

METHODS

The present study employed a cross-sectional correlational research design to explore the association between unemployment and psychological health among university students in Pakistan. Data were collected through purposive sampling from a total of 208 unemployed university students, ensuring a focused assessment of individuals meeting specific eligibility criteria. Participants were between 18 and 35 years of age and enrolled in bachelor's, master's, or doctoral programs at universities recognized by the Higher Education Commission (HEC) of Pakistan. To ensure relevance to the study objective, inclusion criteria required participants to have been unemployed for at least one year prior to the study. Both male and female students were included, while individuals engaged in part-time or freelance work, or who had been unemployed for less than one year, were excluded to maintain uniformity in exposure. The Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scale (DASS-21) was utilized as the primary instrument for data collection. This validated self-report measure comprises 21 items, with seven items each corresponding to the subscales of depression, anxiety, and stress. Responses were recorded using a four-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (“Did not apply to me”) to 3 (“Applied to me most of the time”), with higher scores indicating more severe symptomatology. The DASS-21 has consistently demonstrated robust internal consistency, with Cronbach’s alpha values of 0.88 for depression, 0.82 for anxiety, and 0.90 for stress (19). Participants completed the scale in approximately ten minutes under the supervision of the research team to ensure clarity and completeness.

Ethical protocols were rigorously followed in accordance with the American Psychological Association (APA) Code of Conduct, 7th edition. Prior permission to conduct the study was obtained from the relevant academic department, and formal approval for the use of the DASS-21 was secured from the original author. Participants were fully briefed about the purpose and voluntary nature of the study, and written informed consent was obtained prior to data collection. Confidentiality was strictly maintained, and participants were assured of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without any repercussions. Data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics for Windows, Version 29.0. Descriptive statistics were employed to summarize demographic variables and DASS-21 subscale scores. Inferential statistics, such as Pearson correlation and independent t-tests, were used to examine associations between psychological variables and demographic factors where applicable.

RESULTS

A total of 208 unemployed university students participated in the study. Of these, 69 (33%) were men and 139 (67%) were women. The mean age of the sample was 24.13 years, with a standard deviation of 4.37, reflecting a young adult population. In terms of academic enrollment, 108 participants (52%) were pursuing bachelor’s degrees, 62 (30%) were enrolled in master’s programs, and 38 (18%) were doctoral students. Correlation analysis was performed to examine the relationships among the three psychological variables: depression, anxiety, and stress. Depression showed a strong, statistically significant positive correlation with anxiety ($r = .98, p < .01$) and with stress ($r = .97, p < .01$). Similarly, anxiety was strongly and significantly associated with stress ($r = .99, p < .01$), indicating a high level of co-occurrence among these mental health conditions. The subgroup analysis revealed important differences in psychological health outcomes based on gender and education level. Independent t-tests showed no statistically significant gender differences in depression, anxiety, or stress scores, suggesting that both male and female students experienced comparable levels of psychological distress. However, one-way ANOVA tests revealed statistically significant differences in all three domains—depression, anxiety, and stress—across education levels. Postgraduate students (particularly those enrolled in PhD programs) demonstrated higher mean scores in all psychological variables compared to bachelor and master’s students, indicating that academic advancement may be associated with increased psychological burden. These findings underscore the importance of considering educational context in mental health interventions targeted at unemployed university students.

Table 1: Characteristics of Participants (N=208)

Characteristics	Frequency	Percentage	Mean	Standard Deviation
Gender				
Men	69	33		
Women	139	67		
Age			24.13	4.37
Education Levels				
Bachelor	108	52		
Master	62	30		
PhD	38	18		

Table 2: Correlation among Study Variables (N=208)

Variables	1	2	3	4
1. Depression		-	.98**	.97**
2. Anxiety			-	.99**
3. Stress				-

Table 3: Subgroup Analysis of Depression, Anxiety, and Stress (N=208)

Variable	Gender p-value (t-test)	Education p-value (ANOVA)
Depression	0.2705	0.0038
Anxiety	0.1473	0.0161
Stress	0.2501	0.0225

Interpretation: No significant differences were found in depression, anxiety, or stress scores between male and female students ($p > 0.05$). Significant differences were observed across education levels for all three psychological variables ($p < 0.05$), with higher levels of education associated with increased distress.

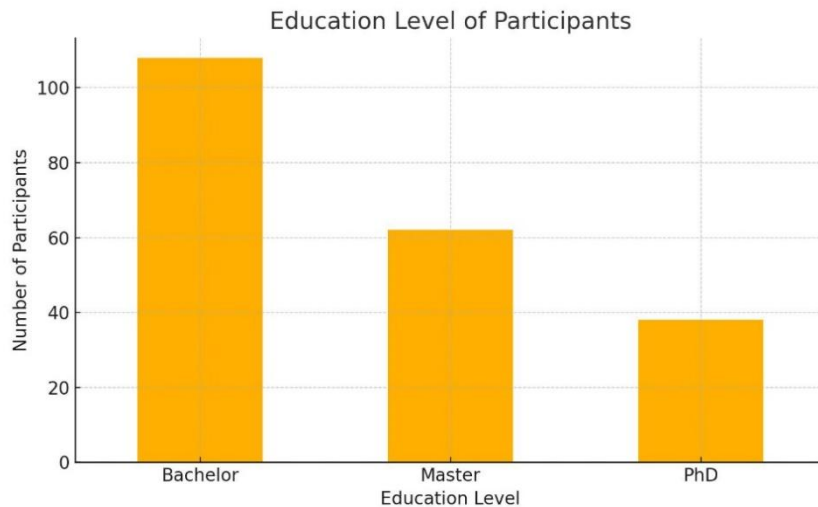


Figure 1 Education Level of Participants

Gender Distribution of Participants

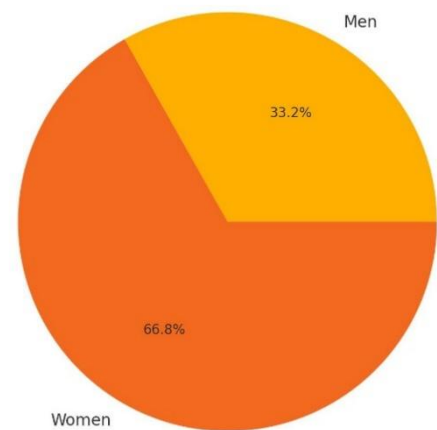


Figure 2 Gender Distribution of Participants

DISCUSSION

The findings of the present study offer valuable insights into the psychological burden experienced by unemployed university students in Pakistan, a population often overlooked in the broader discourse on unemployment and mental health. The significant and positive correlations observed among depression, anxiety, and stress reaffirm the interlinked nature of these psychological constructs. These results are in line with earlier studies conducted on unemployed populations, where psychological distress consistently emerged as a major consequence of joblessness (13-15). Existing literature has demonstrated a similar pattern of associations among these variables within the Pakistani context, further strengthening the current study's validity and reinforcing the relevance of these psychological dimensions in unemployed youth (16,17). A culturally rooted factor contributing to these mental health concerns is Pakistan's collectivistic social structure, which often imposes rigid expectations on young adults. In such a context, unemployment is not merely a personal economic issue but is also perceived as a social failing (18,19). University students, particularly those nearing graduation or at advanced stages of their education, face pressure not only to excel academically but also to secure employment quickly. Failure to do so may lead to internalized shame and a heightened sense of inadequacy, both of which can intensify psychological distress (20,21). These socio-cultural pressures, compounded by limited economic opportunities and weak institutional mental health support, form a complex web that adversely affects the mental well-being of students.

The study's strength lies in its focused exploration of a clearly defined and under-researched population—unemployed university students in Pakistan. By using a validated and reliable instrument such as the DASS-21, the study maintained methodological rigor while highlighting a pertinent psychological concern. The inclusion of subgroup analysis also provided nuanced understanding, showing how psychological distress varies across education levels, thereby offering practical implications for academic institutions and policymakers. However, certain limitations must be acknowledged to contextualize these findings appropriately. The relatively small sample size ($N = 208$) restricts the generalizability of the results to the wider population of unemployed students across Pakistan. Moreover, the unequal representation across gender and educational levels may have influenced the outcomes, potentially masking significant group-wise variations. Future studies should aim for more demographically balanced samples and include additional psychosocial variables such as family pressure, financial dependency, and perceived employability, which could further elucidate the psychological impact of unemployment in collectivistic cultures.

Despite these limitations, the study underscores several key implications. There is a clear need for systemic support mechanisms such as employment and internship programs targeted at university students. The introduction of flexible work models, including remote opportunities, could alleviate financial burdens and reduce psychological stress. In addition, mental health interventions within academic institutions must be expanded, with campaigns promoting awareness and destigmatization of emotional challenges (22). Importantly, psychoeducation for parents and caregivers should be integrated into broader mental health strategies to help families understand the emotional consequences of rigid expectations and societal pressures. In conclusion, the psychological challenges faced by unemployed university students are shaped not only by economic factors but also by deeply ingrained cultural expectations. This study highlights the need for a multidimensional response that integrates economic, academic, and psychological support systems to address the mental health needs of this vulnerable population.

CONCLUSION

The study concluded that depression, anxiety, and stress are significantly interrelated among unemployed university students in Pakistan, highlighting a pressing psychological burden within this vulnerable population. The findings emphasize the need for targeted mental health interventions, culturally sensitive psychoeducation, and increased employment opportunities for youth. Addressing both the emotional and economic dimensions of unemployment can foster resilience, reduce psychological distress, and support students' academic and personal development, ultimately contributing to national well-being.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

Author	Contribution
Ajwa Arooj Ghilzai*	Substantial Contribution to study design, analysis, acquisition of Data Manuscript Writing Has given Final Approval of the version to be published
Jahangir Ashraf	Substantial Contribution to study design, acquisition and interpretation of Data Critical Review and Manuscript Writing Has given Final Approval of the version to be published
Rabia Shakeel	Substantial Contribution to acquisition and interpretation of Data Has given Final Approval of the version to be published
Sheema Nasir	Contributed to Data Collection and Analysis Has given Final Approval of the version to be published
Aurang Zaib Ashraf Shami	Contributed to Data Collection and Analysis Has given Final Approval of the version to be published
Rehma Tariq	Substantial Contribution to study design and Data Analysis Has given Final Approval of the version to be published
Rashida Sadaqat	Contributed to study concept and Data collection Has given Final Approval of the version to be published
Ahmed Javed	Writing - Review & Editing, Assistance with Data Curation

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