

Prevalence of Depression and Anxiety Disorders Among University Students

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ABSTRACT

Depression and anxiety are among the most prevalent mental health disorders affecting university students worldwide. The current study aims to examine the prevalence of depression and anxiety among university students and explore their relationship. A quantitative cross-sectional design was used, and data were collected using the Depression Anxiety Stress Scale (DASS-21). Statistical analyses including reliability, correlation, independent t-test, ANOVA, and regression were conducted. The results indicated a high prevalence of depression and anxiety among students. A strong positive correlation was found between depression and anxiety, and significant gender differences were observed. The findings highlight the urgent need for mental health interventions at the university level.

KEYWORDS: Depression, Anxiety, University Students, Mental Health, Prevalence

Introduction

Background of the Study

Over recent years, mental health has become a pressing public health issue, especially among young adults in higher education. Young adults enrolled in higher education are considered a high-risk group because this period of human development is a time of transition and involves the simultaneous occurrence of various academic, social, emotional and financial stressors. The most common and debilitating mental health problems among students are depression and anxiety (Ibrahim et al., 2013). Depression is defined by a persistent feeling of sadness, disinterest in activities, hopelessness, and a dysfunction in daily activities, while anxiety is marked by excessive worry, feelings of nervousness and physiological symptoms such as heightened heart rate and restlessness (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). These mental health issues not only impact students' emotional well-being, but also have a detrimental effect on their academic achievement, interpersonal interactions

and quality of life (Beiter et al., 2015).

The rates of mental health disorders in university students have risen dramatically worldwide. In a large-scale, multi-country study, Auerbach et al. (2016) reported that one-third of university students experience a mental health disorder, most commonly depression and anxiety. Likewise, a systematic review by Ibrahim et al. (2013) found a prevalence of 10-85% - depending on the population and assessment methods adopted. This suggests the prevalence of mental health problems among students.

Mental Health Challenges in University Life

Higher education is typically seen as a challenging yet rewarding time; yet, it also comes with a number of stressors that can lead to mental health issues. Students must adapt to new learning environments, cope with higher expectations, build new social relationships and in many cases move away from home. This can result in loneliness, stress and emotional instability (Hunt & Eisenberg, 2010). A key factor in students' depression and anxiety is academic stress. With the pressure to perform academically, peer competition, and the risk of failure, students can experience long-term stress that can culminate in psychopathology (Bayram & Bilgel, 2008). Moreover, financial pressures, particularly for poor students, add to the stress.

The rise of technology and social media has also contributed to feelings of anxiety and depression. Overuse of digital media can result in social comparison, cyber-bullying and decreased in-person communication, which can have detrimental effects on mental health (Beiter et al., 2015).

Prevalence of Depression Among University Students

Depression is a major cause of disability globally, and common among students. Available evidence shows that depression is prevalent in all fields of study and geographical areas. Ibrahim et al. (2013) estimated that the rate of depression among university students varies, with many studies reporting rates greater than 30%. In Pakistan, the rate of depression is higher than the global average. A recent study by Khan et al. (2021) found that 42.66% of university students in Pakistan suffer from depression. The elevated rate may be due to stress, cultural pressures, low awareness about mental health, and lack of professional help.

Student depression is linked with a range of negative consequences, such as lower academic achievement, higher drop-out rates, drug use and suicidal thoughts (Kessler et al., 2007). Thus, it is important to know the prevalence and risk factors associated with depression to inform interventions.

Prevalence of Anxiety Among University Students

Anxiety disorders are also common among university students, and may co-exist with depression. Anxiety can take different forms, such as generalized anxiety, social anxiety and panic disorder. Anxiety among students is often related to academic stressors, exams, and concerns about jobs (Bayram & Bilgel, 2008). Research has indicated anxiety levels among college students to be between 30% and 80% worldwide (Asif et al., 2020). The problem is even more severe in Pakistan, with one study showing anxiety prevalence among students above 80% (Asif et al., 2020). These statistics point to a mental health epidemic that must be addressed.

Anxiety affects students' cognitive performance, memory, and decision-making, resulting in diminished academic performance and productivity (Beiter et al., 2015). In addition, anxiety can lead to more serious mental health issues if left untreated.

Comorbidity of Depression and Anxiety

Anxiety and depression often co-exist, studies have shown a positive correlation between these two conditions. Cummings et al. (2014) report that people with anxiety are more likely to experience depression and vice versa. This co-occurrence results in greater symptom severity and treatment complexities. The combination of depression and anxiety may result in more severe psychological dysfunction, such as more distress, decreased functioning and increased risk of suicide (Kessler et al., 2007). Hence, it is crucial to examine both simultaneously for a better understanding of student mental health.

Mental Health Situation in Pakistan

Mental health is a marginalised topic in Pakistan due to stigma, awareness and lack of mental health services. Cultural beliefs contribute to stigma associated with mental health issues, and people are often unwilling to seek professional support (Hunt & Eisenberg, 2010). Pakistani universities are typically under-resourced in terms of mental health services. Instead, they may resort to informal coping strategies that may not address mental health issues. The high rates of depression and anxiety among Pakistani university students suggest that institutional and policies measures should be implemented (Khan et al., 2021).

Problem Statement

While depression and anxiety rates are on the rise among university students, these cases are not adequately diagnosed and treated. Students are reluctant to seek treatment because of the stigma, fear of discrimination, and barriers to accessing mental health care services. This mismatch between the demand and supply of mental health services exacerbates mental disorders among students. So, it is important to determine the prevalence of depression and anxiety among university students and their factors to develop interventions.

Objectives of the Study

The main objectives of this study are:

- To determine the prevalence of depression among university students
- To determine the prevalence of anxiety among university students
- To examine the relationship between depression and anxiety
- To investigate demographic differences in depression and anxiety

Research Questions

- What is the prevalence of depression among university students?
- What is the prevalence of anxiety among university students?
- Is there a significant relationship between depression and anxiety?
- Do demographic variables significantly affect depression and anxiety?

Significance of the Study

This study is significant as it contributes to the existing body of knowledge on student mental health. The findings can help policymakers, educators, and mental health professionals develop targeted interventions to address depression and anxiety among students. Additionally, the study can raise awareness about the importance of mental health and encourage students to seek professional help (World Health Organization, 2021).

Rationale of the Study

The rationale for this study is based on the increasing prevalence of mental health disorders among university students and the lack of adequate research in the Pakistani context. Since most mental health disorders begin during young adulthood, early identification and intervention are crucial for preventing long-term consequences (Kessler et al., 2007).

Scope of the Study

This study focuses on university students aged 18–25 years and examines the prevalence of depression and anxiety using standardized.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Worldwide Prevalence of Depression and Anxiety

Globally, depression and anxiety are common among university students. Ibrahim et al. (2013) found a systematic review of rates that vary from 10% to 85%, depending on the population studied and instruments used. Likewise, Auerbach et al. (2016) reported 35% of students around the world suffer from mental health disorders.

Depression in College Students

Depression is defined by feelings of sadness, anhedonia and functional impairment (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Studies show depression has a negative impact on academic performance and well-being (Beiter et al., 2015).

Depression is prevalent among Pakistani students. Khan et al. (2021) found that 42.66% of students suffer from depression. Academic stress, lack of social support and financial problem are some of the causes of depression (Shaikh et al., 2004).

Anxiety Among University Students

Anxiety disorders can be characterised by worrying, fidgetiness and poor concentration (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Anxiety can be associated with educational stress and uncertainty about the future (Bayram & Bilgel, 2008).

Data has indicated that between 30% and 80% of students report anxiety (Asif et al., 2020). Elevated levels of anxiety can result in lower academic achievement and quality of life (Beiter et al., 2015).

Comorbidity Between Depression and Anxiety

Anxiety is associated with depression and research indicates a high positive association (Cummings et al., 2014). This co-occurrence leads to greater symptom severity and treatment difficulties.

Gender Differences

The prevalence of depression and anxiety is greater among female students than males (Bayram & Bilgel, 2008). This could be due to physiological, psychological, and social influences.

Research Gap

Earlier research has been based on medical students or specific groups. More research is needed to include varied groups of university students in Pakistan, applying more sophisticated statistical approaches.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study used a quantitative cross-sectional design to examine the rates of depression and anxiety in university students. The use of a cross-sectional design was deemed appropriate as it enables data to be gathered at one point and the relationship between variables to be examined (Creswell, 2014). This type of design is common in psychological and social science research for estimating the prevalence of a condition and examining patterns in a population. The quantitative approach allowed for statistical analysis of the relationship between depression and anxiety and differences according to demographic characteristics.

Population and Sample

The population under study was university students between the ages of 18 and 25 years from diverse courses. A sample of 200 students was chosen using the convenience sampling method, a common approach in behavioral research because it is convenient and time-efficient (Etikan et al., 2016). Both male and female students from various academic backgrounds were represented. While this type of sampling may reduce the generalizability of the results, it is suitable for exploratory research to detect trends and correlations among a particular population.

Research Instrument

In this study, data were gathered using the Depression Anxiety Stress Scale (DASS-21), a popular standardized self-report questionnaire from Lovibond and Lovibond (1995). The DASS-21 has 21 items that are grouped into three subscales: depression, anxiety and stress. There are seven items on each subscale that are rated on a 4-point Likert scale (0-3), from 0 (Did not apply to me at all) to 3 (Applied to me very much or most of the time). The DASS-21 has good psychometric properties with high levels of reliability and validity in various populations (Henry & Crawford, 2005). In this study, only the depression and anxiety subscales were administered to measure the rate of these disorders among the student population.

Data Collection Procedure

A questionnaire survey was conducted among university students to collect data. Students were recruited in their university and were briefed on the study. Consent was sought and obtained prior to their participation in the study to ensure voluntary participation. The surveys were administered in hard copy and online format to ensure

a high response rate. Anonymity and confidentiality were ensured and the respondents were asked to answer the items truthfully. The collection of data was done within a particular time frame.

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to ethical guidelines. The purpose of the study was explained to the participants and they were assured that they could choose to withdraw from the study at any point without facing any repercussions. Anonymity and confidentiality of responses were ensured. Personal identifiers were not gathered and the results of the study were used only for educational purposes. This is in line with social science research ethics (American Psychological Association, 2017).

Data Analysis Techniques

The data were analysed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). A number of statistical methods were used to accomplish the research goals. First, Cronbach's alpha was conducted to measure the reliability of the scale used, establishing internal consistency (Field, 2013). Second, basic statistics like mean and standard deviation were employed to describe the data. Third, Pearson correlation was used to assess the correlation between depression and anxiety. Fourth, an independent samples t-test was conducted to examine differences between males and females. Fifth, a one-way ANOVA test was used to compare age groups. Last, the regression analysis was conducted to test if anxiety is a predictor of depression. These methods are commonly employed in psychological studies for examining relationships and comparisons (Cohen, 1988).

Result

Reliability Analysis

Scale	Cronbach Alpha
Depression	0.87
Anxiety	0.89

Interpretation:

The reliability values are above 0.70, indicating good internal consistency (Field, 2013).

Correlation Analysis

Variables	r value	p value
Depression & Anxiety	0.68	0.001

Interpretation:

A strong positive correlation exists between depression and anxiety, indicating that higher depression is associated with higher anxiety (Cohen, 1988).

Independent t-test

Variable	Male Mean	Female Mean	p value
Depression	19.5	22.8	0.02
Anxiety	20.2	24.9	0.01

Interpretation:

Female students reported significantly higher levels of depression and anxiety, consistent with previous research (Bayram & Bilgel, 2008).

ANOVA

Variable	F value	p value
Depression	3.45	0.03
Anxiety	4.12	0.02

Interpretation:

Significant differences were found across age groups.

4.5 Regression Analysis

Predictor	Beta	p value
Anxiety	0.65	0.001

Interpretation:

Anxiety is a significant predictor of depression.

DISCUSSION

This study shows that a large proportion of university students suffer from depression and anxiety, which is in line with previous research (Auerbach et al., 2016; Khan et al., 2021). The significant positive association between anxiety and depression is consistent with Cummings et al. (2014), who found these conditions often co-exist.

The gender differences identified in this study are consistent with other studies which report higher levels of psychological distress among females (Bayram & Bilgel, 2008). The findings point to the impact of academic performance, social demands and scarcity of mental health resources in mental health problems of students.

In conclusion, our study highlights the need for mental health awareness, counselling and support services in universities.

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