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Predicting Psychological Distress among University Students: The Role of Resilience and Burnout

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study aimed to investigate the relationship between the variables of Psychological distress, resilience, and burnout and how resilience and burnout as an independent variable predicts psychological distress among university students. Additionally, the study sought to analyze gender differences in psychological distress, resilience, and burnout among university students.

Methods: The study utilized a quantitative approach with a cross-sectional research design and convenience sampling technique. The research included 200 participants from the universities of Islamabad and Rawalpindi, Pakistan. Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10), brief resilience scale (BRS), and Burnout Assessment Tool (BAT) were administered to the participant. Descriptive statistics, Pearson moment correlation, linear regression and t-test analysis were employed for hypothesis testing.

Results: The findings indicate that psychological distress had a significant negative relationship with resilience among university students. Furthermore, psychological distress had a significant positive relationship with burnout among university students. Burnout had significant negative relationship with resilience among university students. Regression analysis indicates that resilience as an independent variable, explains 24% of the variance in the psychological distress & burnout as an independent variable, explains 6% of the variance in the psychological distress. Results also showed that there was a significant gender difference in psychological distress, whereas no significant gender difference was found in resilience and burnout. Female students had higher psychological distress as compared to male students.

Conclusion: Students facing prolonged periods of stress may experience burnout. There is need to pay recognition and acknowledgement of the condition, followed by commitment to change current habits of students and counseling services by educational institutes.



Introduction

The transition between high school and university is one of the significant changes in life marked by independence, more difficult educational requirements, and a new social relationship. As much as this phase promotes personal development, it also brings a lot of stressors, which may pose a threat to the mental stability of a student. Students usually find it difficult to deal with a large workload and high performance demands with the financial burden and pressure to create new social networks. Together with the anxieties about future professions, these conditions often result in burnout and emotional distress. As a result, the increasing prevalence of mental health challenges in campuses has become a major issue of concern by the global health care sectors.

Psychological distress is also an intricate problem that incorporates a combination of anxiety, depression, emotional burnout, and loneliness. It usually happens when the requirements of the surroundings of a person are more than his or her competence (Hewitt et al., 2018). Studies always indicate that this distress is rampant among the students in universities, irrespective of the area of study and the place of residence. Some of the earliest researches, including the one conducted by Ibrahim et al. (2013), found that academic stress, financial difficulties, and social adaptation are some of the most significant predictors of student stress. These statistics were similar to a global survey by Beiter et al. (2015), which revealed anxiety and depression rates exceeded by far the majority of college campuses worldwide. The current statistics prove that these issues are not fading. Wang et al. (2021) associated high levels of distress with academic burnout directly among medical students, whereas Ullah et al. (2025) discovered that depression and maladaptive perfectionism, which is the requirement to be perfect, is a significant contributor to burnout among Pakistani students. These studies determine, in the end, that distress not only harms the mental health of a student, but it also actively disrupts his or her learning and engagement with the studies.

Psychological distress has a far-reaching and overwhelming effect on the students in universities. According to a study conducted by Regehr et al. (2013), the extreme distress is highly associated with poor concentrations, lower grades, absenteeism, and the probability of clinical mental illnesses. In cases when the students feel overwhelmed, they can hardly cope with the academic and social requirements, and soon they may experience emotional burnout and complete disengagement with their schooling. It was taken to the extreme during the COVID-19 pandemic. Research in the global studies indicated that anxiety, stress and depression were on the increase with a sharp rise among the student body in this period. In particular, in Pakistan, Khan and Jamil (2022) noted that distress caused by the pandemic had a significant impact on mental health but students with resilience and purpose were less vulnerable to them. These lessons demonstrate that it is of utmost importance that universities go beyond identifying issues and begin to concentrate on the protective factors that would allow their students to remain psychologically healthy when faced with a crisis situation.

Resiliency is one of such protective mechanisms. A concept that defines resilience is the ability to adjust easily to tragedy, a state of psychological balance, and to get over stressful situations (Luthar et al., 2006). Instead of being a permanent feature, resilience is theorized as a dynamic process that is influenced by the interaction between personal factors and the available environmental resources. The theoretical frameworks like the ecological systems theory by Bronfenbrenner (1979) state that multilayered factors, such as individual coping abilities, social support systems, institutional systems, and larger sociocultural systems, result in resilience. In the university context, resilience is a crucial factor that can help



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students to overcome the difficulties in their education, experience failures, and maintain motivation and psychological health.

Studies have identified some of the most relevant aspects that enable university students to be resilient in situations of pressure. In 2003, Connor and Davidson determined that a solid social circle, optimism, being a good problem-solver, and self-esteem are the keys to recovering after being stressed. This has been supported by other research since that time; an example is Galli et al. (2019), who found that students who employ healthy coping skills and who also felt able to do things (self-efficacy) were far more resilient. The same trend is true in Pakistan. Malik and Batool (2023) reported that students who had a high academic resilience had much lower stress levels. In the same manner, Ahmed et al. (2023) found out that resilience serves as an intermediary to accountancy students, with students who possess grit not burning out. Given a larger scope, a massive meta-analysis by Lee et al. (2023) established that resiliency-building programs do make a difference, indeed, they reduced burnout and improved mental health in general. Combined, this evidence demonstrates that resilience is not merely a nice-to-have quality; it is an important psychological asset, which enables students to adjust and succeed during their course of education.

Resilience has been specifically important in the explanation of burnout, a syndrome which is associated with chronic emotional exhaustion, cynicism or depersonalization, and diminished personal accomplishment due to prolonged stress exposure (Maslach et al., 2001). Even though the conceptualization of burnout was originally applied to occupational contexts, there are increasing amounts of evidence that university students are prone to burnout because of the long-term stress and demands to perform, lack of recovery opportunities because of the nature of higher learning. Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) has been extensively employed in measuring burnout among students, and invariably demonstrates high values of emotional exhaustion within the various fields. Dyrbye et al. (2010) also revealed high burnout rates in medical students, whereas Leiter and Maslach (2016) have also recorded high rates of burnout among students in various disciplines of academic subjects.

According to the latest studies, student burnout is not a one-dimensional event, but an escalating crisis in higher education institutions. Most recently, Fatima et al. (2025) conducted an interview among Pakistan-based medical students to demonstrate that enormous workloads, emotional burnout, and the exasperating absence of institutional support all put them on the verge of burnout. The data supports these qualitative results; Ullah et al. (2025) made sure that in their quantitative research, general psychological distress and pressure caused by perfectionism are the most effective sources of burnout among Pakistani undergraduates. This isn't just a local issue. The results correspond to the prevailing data all over the globe that after a student becomes burnt out, their grades decline, their motivation disappears, and they become significantly vulnerable to severe mental health predicaments (Bianchi et al., 2015; Salmela-Aro et al., 2009). Ultimately, burnout does more than just hurt a student's current GPA; it can leave lasting scars on their psychological well-being and stall their professional growth before their careers even begin.

Importantly, the relationship between psychological distress, resilience, and burnout is complex and interdependent. Psychological distress can erode students' coping capacities, thereby weakening resilience and increasing susceptibility to burnout. Conversely, resilience functions as a protective factor that buffers the negative effects of stress and reduces burnout risk. Karatas and Tagay (2019) demonstrated that students with higher resilience reported significantly lower levels of psychological distress and burnout. More



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recently, Wang et al. (2021) provided robust empirical evidence that resilience mediates the relationship between distress and burnout, suggesting that resilient students are better able to regulate emotions, utilize adaptive coping strategies, and seek social support when confronted with stressors. Evidence from Pakistan further supports this model. Studies by Ahmed et al. (2023) and Fatima et al. (2025) highlight the critical role of resilience and effective coping in mitigating the adverse consequences of distress and preventing burnout among university students.

Despite the growing body of international literature, there remains a need for context-specific research that examines these relationships within developing countries such as Pakistan, where sociocultural, academic, and institutional factors may uniquely shape students' experiences of distress, resilience, and burnout. Many existing studies focus on single variables or specific student subgroups, limiting a comprehensive understanding of how these constructs interact within broader university populations. Furthermore, identifying resilience as a modifiable protective factor offers important implications for designing targeted interventions aimed at reducing distress and preventing burnout in higher education settings. In light of these considerations, the present study seeks to examine the relationship between psychological distress, resilience, and burnout among university students. By investigating the associations among these variables, this research aims to contribute to a more integrated understanding of student mental health and to identify potential intervention points that can enhance resilience and reduce burnout. The findings are expected to inform educational institutions, policymakers, and mental health professionals in developing evidence-based, culturally relevant support systems to promote psychological well-being and academic success among university students

Rationale

Stress is a constant factor in every student's life especially when one is in university and has to meet deadlines of assignments and countless other submissions simultaneously within a restricted period of time. Some Individuals are able to manage their stress in a healthy manner than others, by using it as a motivational force to get their work done efficiently within time while continuing their daily responsibilities in their usual manner. However, when certain stress levels exceed the parameters of normalcy and become hard to cope with, they may result in a myriad of ways of causing disturbance in an Individual's life. Stress when exerted outwards may result in mood outbursts however when directed inwards, it can give rise to many psychological, emotional and physiological disturbances to the Individual and therefore disturbing his overall functioning and sometimes, even leading to the state of emotional, physical and mental exhaustion of burn out. The aim of this research is to study the relationship between Psychological Distress, Burn Out and Resilience among private university students in Pakistan. The way an Individual's ability to be resilient and bounce back from stressful situations can be related to the appearance of symptoms of psychological distress and burnout. The intention behind the conduction of this research was to add to the literature pertaining to the chosen variables.

Hypotheses

1. There is a negative relationship between psychological distress and resilience among university students.
2. There is a positive relationship between psychological distress and burnout among university students.
3. There is a negative relationship between resilience and burn out among university student.



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4. There is a significant difference between male and female university students in the levels of psychological distress.

Methodology

Research Design

The study employed cross-sectional correlational research.

Sample

The sample consisted of around 200 adult university students, with an age range of 18 to 24 were recruited through a convenience sampling method. University students from bachelor's and master's programs across private universities from Rawalpindi and Islamabad were included in our research. Since the form was in English, it was required that the participants were well-versed in the English Language. There was no discrimination based on gender, race, or creed among the participants. Individuals not enrolled in any university and those who faced difficulty communicating in English were not made a part of the study.

Measures

Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10)

The Kessler psychological distress scale currently used in research was developed by Kessler & Mroczek (1992). The scale is 5-point Likert scale, and it consists total 10 items. The response categories range from 1 (none of the time) to 5 (all the time). The minimum score is 10 and the maximum score is 50. The high scores indicate high levels of psychological distress whereas the low scores indicate low levels of psychological distress. The alpha reliability of a scale is .88 (Kessler et.al, 2003).

The Brief Resilience Scale

The brief resilience scale currently used in research was developed by Smith et al. (2008). The scale is 5-point Likert scale and consists of 6 items. The range of response categories begins from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Lower scores represent lower level of resilience, and higher scores represent high level of resilience. The scale has reverse item 2, 4 and 6 which are negatively worded while the 1, 3 and 5 items are positively worded. The 2, 4 and 6 items have reverse coding scores. The minimum and maximum score on the scale is 6 and 30 respectively. The alpha reliability of a scale is .80 to .91 (Smith, et.al, 2008).

Burnout Assessment Tool

Burnout was assessed using the short version of the Burnout Assessment Tool (BAT-12), version 2.0, developed by Schaufeli et al. (2019). The BAT-12 is a self-report measure that consist of 3 subscales: exhaustion, mental distance, cognitive impairment, and emotional impairment. The scale has a 5-point rating scale that ranges from 1 (never) to 5 (always). Higher scores on the scale represent higher risk for burnout. The Cronbach alpha reliability value for the present study is .80 for total scale.

Procedure

The data collection process was conducted in accordance with ethical guidelines to safeguard the rights and well-being of participants. The sample was collected from the universities of Islamabad and Rawalpindi (N=200). Every confusion regarding the research and questionnaires was made clear. All the queries of participants regarding the questionnaire were answered properly. Participants were further informed about



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confidentiality of their data and their right to withdraw from research at any time. At last informed consent were obtained from the participants before the administration of the questionnaires. In the end, the cooperation of respondents was acknowledged.

Results

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of sample (N=200)

Demographic Variables	<i>n</i>	%	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
1.Age	-	-	19.45	1.83
2.Gender				
Male	87	43.5		
Female	113	56.5		
3. Education				
Bachelors	170	85		
Masters	30	15		
4. Socioeconomic Status				
Lower Class	14	7		
Middle Class	179	89.5		
Upper Class	7	3.5		

Note. N = 200 (n = participant), % = Percentage, M = Mean, SD = Standard deviation

Table 1 indicates the mean age of sample is 19.45 years, with standard deviation of 1.83. With respect to gender, 43.5% participants were male and 56.5% participants were female. In terms of education, 85% of the individuals have a bachelor's degree whereas 15% of individuals have master's degree. Regarding socioeconomic status, 7% belong to lower class, 89.5% belong to middle class and 3.5% belong to upper class.

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics and Reliability Estimate of Participants for study variables (N=200)

Scales	Item	M	SD	α	Range	
					Potential	Actual
KPD	10	24.96	7.54	.88	10-50	10-50



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BRS	6	18.25	3.76	.50	6-30	10-29
BAT	15	67.94	10.42	.68	43-105	8-35

Note. M= mean, SD= Standard deviation, KPD= Kessler psychological distress Scale, BRS= brief resilience scale, BS= burnout assessment tool, a= reliability.

Table 2 shows the alpha reliabilities for all the study variables. The alpha reliability of psychological distress scale is .88. The alpha reliability of resilience scale is .55 while the alpha reliability of burnout scale is .68. Actual range describes the minimum and maximum range obtained by the sample on the scale along with mean and standard deviation of study variables (psychological distress, burnout and resilience)

Table 3

Correlation analysis on all study variables (N= 200)

		1	2	3	4
1	Age	-	.05	-.01	.07
2	PD		-	-.79**	.85**
3	Resilience			-	-.74**
4	Burnout				-

P < 0.05, **p < 0.01 Note: PD= psychological distress.

Table 3 illustrates the correlation between psychological distress, resilience and burnout. Results of the study depict that psychological distress has significant positive relationship with burnout and has significant negative relationship with resilience. Burnout has significant negative relationship with resilience.

Table 4

Resilience Predicting Psychological Distress among University Students (N=200)

Predictors	R ²	F	β	t	95% CI	
					LL	UL
Constant				11.80	36.04	50.66
Resilience	.24	26.67	-.79**	-5.16	-1.41	-.62

Note: *p < .05. **p < .01.

As shown in Table regression analysis indicates that the model, which includes resilience as an independent variable, explains 24% of the variance in the psychological distress.

Table 5



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Burnout Predicting Psychological Distress among University Students (N=200)

Predictors	R ²	F	β	t	95% CI	
					LL	UL
Constant				3.58	5.49	18.96
Burnout	.06	14.24	.85**	3.77	.09	.28

Note: *p < .05. **p < .01.

Table 5 indicates that the regression analysis, which includes burnout as an independent variable, explains 6% of the variance in the psychological distress among university students.

Table 6

Mean, Standard Deviation and t- values of Male and Female students on all Study Variables. (N=200)

Scales	Male Students (n=87)		Female Students (n=113)		t	p	95% CI		Cohen's d
	M	SD	M	SD			LL	UL	
PD	23.33	8.06	26.22	6.89	-2.72	.00	-4.97	-.79	0.38
Resilience	18.58	3.98	18.05	3.57	.76	.44	-1.00	2.27	-
Burnout	68.72	11.66	67.33	9.36	.90	.36	-1.63	4.40	-

Note: M= mean, SD= Standard deviation, PD= psychological distress

Table 6 shows that there is a significant difference between male students and female students along psychological distress whereas there is a non-significant difference in gender regarding resilience and burnout Results show that Females have greater psychological distress as compared to males.

Discussion

The purpose of present study was to examine the association among psychological distress, resilience and burnout among university students. The data was collected from a sample of 200 students from different universities of Islamabad and Rawalpindi through convenient sampling method technique. The key study variables were measured by standardized reliable instruments, as their psychometric properties ensure their reliability. The Kessler psychological distress Scale (K10) (Kessler & Mroczek, 1992), brief resilience scale (Smith et al., 2008) and burnout assessment tool scale were used to assess the study variables. The current study found that psychological distress has a negative relationship with resilience, which is supported by past findings. The individuals who have high psychological distress have low resilience. The high resilience increases a person's



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emotional coping ability, helping them navigate distressing situations without damage (Lin et al., 2021). Based on correlational analysis, psychological distress has a significantly positive relation with burnout, which is consistent with past research. It indicates that people who have high levels of psychological distress in their lives also suffer from burnout. Every individual has a limit for tolerating distress, and when emotional burdens accumulate beyond that threshold, distress intensifies and can ultimately result in burnout, marked by emotional exhaustion. This is why the prolonged increase in psychological distress increases the chances of burnout in an individual (Wit & Mercuri, 2020). Further, it was found that resilience and burnout are significantly negative in relation. This means that if an individual can face adverse events or has high resilience, then the burnout will be low. The people with high emotional stability can deal with any situation, because they have high resilience, through which they can find solutions to their problems, no matter how hard that is, they don't find any situation hard or they are calm enough to deal with them that is why no situation can have stressed them out and the burnout in such people is low (Smith & Emerson, 2021). The regression analysis indicated that both Resilience and burnout serve as meaningful predictors of psychological Distress, with resilience 24% and burnout 6% of the variance. These findings are consistent with previous studies that both burnout and resilience are significant predictors of psychological distress, with burnout exacerbating distress and resilience attenuating it (Andargeery & Taani, 2024; Emerson, 2023). Additionally, a T-test analysis was employed to compare the differences between male and female university students across all study variables. The result shows a significant difference between male and female students on psychological distress, with females high on psychological distress as compared to males (Rakhmanov et al., 2020). Furthermore, it was found that there is no gender disparity in resilience, supported by past research (Jillani & Ahmed, 2023). One possible reason for this is the prevalence of gender equality in our society, which results in increased focus of society on providing equal opportunities to both genders. This equality allows females to explore their abilities and options by discovering themselves, which leads to a positive self-view, developing and strengthening their resilience (Riasat & Yasin, 2024). Moreover, this study also shows no significant difference in burnout between male and female university students, which is consistent with previous research indicating that gender does not affect burnout (Chang & Lin, 2014; Riasat & Yasin, 2024).

Limitations and Suggestions

There are some limitations of this research that might limit the generalizability of the results. These limitations and suggestions will improve future research by providing information.

The difference in age in study variables can be studied, to see at which age the psychological distress, burnout and resilience are high or low.

The study variables can be studied with other demographics like socioeconomic status, to observe how do socioeconomic status impacts on individual's psychological distress, burnout and resilience.

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