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Relationship Between Obsessive Thoughts, Anxiety Symptoms, and Coping Strategies in University Students

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research was to determine the interrelationship of obsession, anxiety, and coping among college students. Life at universities tends to involve high levels of academic pressures, social problems, and individual accountability, and therefore is likely to cause some psychological issues. Students may report obsessive thoughts and anxiety-related symptoms as common experiences, which may affect their coping methods. The study was based on the cognitive behavioral theory of obsessions and the stress and coping transactional model. A Quantitative cross sectional correlational research approach was adopted for the study. Participants for the study included 250 university students ranging in age from 18 to 25 years that were recruited through convenience sampling from the University of Gujrat, Pakistan. For data collection, standardized self-report measures were used in the form of the Obsessive Compulsive Inventory Revised (OCI-R) for measuring obsessive thoughts, the Beck Anxiety Inventory (BAI) for measuring anxiety symptoms, and Brief COPE Inventory for measuring coping methods. These findings reveal that there is a low correlation between obsessive thinking and anxiety with the coping mechanism, indicating that these constructs were poor predictors of the coping strategy employed by the participants. These results demonstrate the complexity involved in the process of coping and imply that there might be other variables influencing the coping process.

Keywords: Obsessive Thoughts, Anxiety Symptoms, Coping Strategies, University Students, Mental Health

Introduction:

University students experience a distinct life stage which includes academic demands, personal development, social changes, and new responsibilities. University students develop greater independence during this life stage yet they face more intense mental health challenges. The university students population most frequently reports two psychological issues: obsessive thoughts and anxiety symptoms that disrupt their coping strategies and their mental health progress. The three elements of obsessive thoughts, anxiety symptoms, and coping strategies need to be studied together to help university students achieve better mental health outcomes and academic success.

University students commonly experience psychological distress due to academic pressure and social demands together with their uncertainties about upcoming events.



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Among these concerns, people most commonly report their obsessive thoughts together with their anxiety symptoms. The mental condition of obsessive thoughts results in unwanted intrusive thoughts that produce intense distress for people. The normal human experience of intrusive thoughts becomes a problem when people continue to think about them because they interpret them negatively, which leads to anxiety (**Rachman, 1997**). Research by Clark (2005) shows that people who attribute threatening meanings to their intrusive thoughts will experience higher anxiety levels while using ineffective coping strategies.

The variables in the research are clearly defined with operational definitions, which indicate what is meant by each variable.

Obsessive Thoughts:

Repetitive, intrusive, and unwanted thoughts or images that cause distress, evaluated using a standardized obsessive-compulsive symptom scale.

Anxiety Symptoms:

Emotional and physical symptoms of anxiety include excessive worrying, restlessness, tension, and fear, measured through a standardized anxiety assessment tool.

Coping Strategies:

Individuals employ cognitive and behavioral techniques to manage their stress, assessed by a validated coping strategies questionnaire to identify their adaptive and maladaptive coping styles.

Obsessive thoughts are defined as recurrent, intrusive, and unwanted thoughts, images, or impulses that cause marked distress or anxiety (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2013). The central component of obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) consists of clinical obsessions, yet non-clinical populations can experience subclinical obsessive thoughts during stressful times. According to Rachman (1997), these thoughts create ego-dystonic experiences because they present a self-discrepancy that the person cannot control. University students display obsessive thoughts through excessive academic performance uncertainty and fear of making mistakes, and they keep thinking about their social interactions, and they worry about their future situations.

Anxiety symptoms refer to cognitive, emotional, and physiological responses that involve excessive worry together with nervousness, restlessness, muscle tension, and autonomic arousal (Beck & Clark, 1997). Anxiety exists on a continuum that starts with adaptive alertness and ends with maladaptive distress that disrupts people from doing their everyday tasks. University students experience anxiety symptoms at extremely high rates. Epidemiological research indicates that anxiety disorders are among the most common mental health conditions worldwide (**Baxter et al., 2013**). Academic settings experience negative effects from anxiety because it disrupts students' ability to focus and remember information and achieve academic success. Persistent anxiety increases cognitive distortions which include catastrophic thinking and excessive worry.

Anxiety disorder manifests through three primary symptoms which include excessive anxiety, physical tension, and mental disruption which causes people to lose their ability to focus. The cognitive model of anxiety (**Beck & Clark, 1997**) proposes that anxiety results from biased information processing because people develop increased focus on their immediate threats. People with anxiety disorders exhibit greater attention to negative stimuli while they struggle to stop their worry-based thinking patterns.

The current research uses both the **Cognitive-Behavioral Model of Obsessions** and the



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Transactional Model of Stress and Coping as its foundation. According to the Cognitive-Behavioral Model, people in the general population experience intrusive thinking however, these notions become troublesome when persons ughts and anxiety symptoms.

The Transactional Model of Stress and Coping describes how people react to anxious event through cognitive appraisal and coping techniques (**Lazarus & Folkman, 1984**). According to this model, cognitive outcomes rely on how individuals assess a stressor and the coping strategies they employ. Improved psychological adjustment is achieved through adaptive coping methods such as problem-solving and seeking support, whereas maladaptive coping by avoidance and rumination results in elevated distress levels.

The integration of these theories illustrates how obsessive thoughts lead to greater anxiety symptoms while explaining how coping strategies influence this relationship by either reducing or increasing anxiety levels.

Research demonstrates that there exists a strong connection between obsessive thoughts and anxiety symptoms. Obsessive thinking patterns frequently elevate emotional distress because individuals cannot control their unwanted thoughts. The act of thought suppression has been shown to increase intrusive thought patterns according to Clark (2005), which results in higher anxiety levels.

People use coping strategies to handle both their obsessive thoughts and their anxiety. **Lazarus and Folkman (1984)** described coping as cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage stress. **Carver et al. (1989)** identified different coping dimensions which included problem-focused and emotion-focused coping. Studies demonstrate that people who use maladaptive coping strategies such as avoidance denial and rumination will experience more anxiety symptoms while people who select adaptive coping strategies will encounter less psychological distress (**Carver et al. 1989**).

Existing research has investigated anxiety and coping within student populations but only a few studies have explored how obsessive thoughts and anxiety symptoms interact with coping strategies in university environments. The development of psychological interventions for students requires understanding how coping mechanisms affect the relationship between obsessive thoughts and anxiety symptoms.

The research conducted by **Compas et al.** during the year **2001** showed that adolescents and young adults who used maladaptive coping strategies, especially avoidance and denial, experienced greater psychological distress. The study found that people who used adaptive coping strategies experienced improved psychological adjustment which benefited their mental health. **Folkman and Moskowitz (2004)** showed that coping flexibility functions as a predictor for better psychological results. People who use avoidance coping through strict methods will experience persistent intrusive thoughts. Research demonstrates that people who try to suppress their intrusive thoughts will experience greater unexpected thought occurrence through the rebound effect.

perceive them as threatening or highly significant to themselves (**Clark, 2005; Rachman, 1997**).

Negative interpretations of their symptoms cause heightened anxiety, prompting individuals to repeat mental or physical behaviors they think will alleviate their distress. The cycle develops into a stronger pattern that reinforces both obsessive thoughts

The research establishes its importance through its contribution to the study of university student psychological experiences. The research demonstrates how obsessive thoughts and anxiety symptoms are connected while showing the vital role of coping methods. The results will assist university counselors and mental health professionals in developing preventive programs and coping skills training workshops. The study also



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aims to advance academic research about student mental health in higher education environments.

The research combines Cognitive Theory with the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping to create a comprehensive framework which studies obsessive thoughts and anxiety in academic environments. The research fills a literature gap by studying both obsessive thoughts and anxiety symptoms together with university student coping mechanisms instead of focusing on clinical populations. The results will help university counseling services to create cognitive-behavioral interventions together with coping-skills programs which meet student requirements. Academic institutions can promote psychological resilience and decrease distress-related academic decline through understanding these relationship patterns.

University students experience various anxious situations that increase their likelihood of developing intrusive thoughts and anxiety symptoms. Research has studied anxiety and coping strategies as separate phenomena; however, there exists a research gap that needs to be filled by investigating how coping strategies affect the connection between obsessive thoughts and anxiety symptoms. The relationship between factors needs to be understood because this knowledge helps with early detection and treatment. The study will complete the research gap by examining the studied variables within a university student population.

University students encounter various stress factors that increase their risk of experiencing cognitive and emotional disturbances. Obsessive thoughts, which usually exist below clinical levels, have the potential to amplify anxiety symptoms while disrupting academic and social activities. The impact of coping methods on this relationship needs further research because existing studies have not investigated it in non-Western university environments.

Whereas earlier researchers studied either of the variables independently—obsessive thoughts or anxiety symptoms—very little research has been done on the interrelationship of both variables along with coping mechanisms. There are differences among cultures in terms of cognition, which necessitates separate research into different environments. With this research, an attempt will be made to find out if the coping mechanism acts as a shield against the risk involved in linking obsessive thoughts and anxiety symptoms. This research project will enhance our knowledge about psychological mechanisms that impact university student behavior while developing mental health prevention strategies.

Objectives

To examine the relationship between Obsessive thoughts, anxiety symptoms and Coping Strategies among university students

Methodology

Research Design

In this study, university students' coping mechanisms, anxiety symptoms, and obsessive thoughts were investigated using a quantitative cross-sectional correlational research approach. Because the goal of the study was to investigate the association between psychological variables without changing them, correlational research methodology was deemed appropriate (Creswell, 2014). Standardized psychological questionnaires were adopted as part of survey research techniques to collect data from respondents simultaneously. This approach facilitated the identification of the nature and extent of relationships between coping strategies, anxiety symptoms, and obsessive thoughts among university students.



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Participants

A total of 250 college students were selected for this study through different undergraduate and graduate courses offered at the university. The subjects consisted of young adults. The age group of the participants varied between 18 and 25 years old which is considered an average age for college students. To include the most diverse sample of the population, students from different departments and semesters participated in this study. University students who agreed to take part in the study were administered questionnaires voluntarily.

The target population of the study comprised of the University of Gujrat Pakistan university students. This demographic was chosen because of the frequency with which they come across academic stress, societal pressures, and adaptation problems which are known to trigger obsessive thoughts and symptoms related to anxiety (Misra & McKean, 2000). Besides, coping strategies utilized by students for dealing with stressful situations may also be affected by these psychological variables. As such, this study was conducted among university students to better understand the connection between obsession and anxiety and coping strategies in the classroom environment.

Size of Sample and Sampling Technique Used

250 university students from the University of Gujrat comprised the size of the sample for this research study. The size of the sample is considered to be sufficient enough to conduct correlation and regression analysis and ensure increased reliability of results (Cohen, 1992). A convenient sampling technique was employed for participant selection purposes. This technique enabled the use of samples that were easy to obtain and willing to participate in the research process. In order to make the sample more diverse, data was collected from different academic departments.

Instruments of the Study

Obsessive Thoughts

In order to measure the intensity of the obsessive thoughts, Obsessive-Compulsive Inventory-Revised (OCI-R) scale developed by Foa et al. (2002) was administered. One of the most commonly used tools in assessing the symptoms of obsessive-compulsive disorder, including intrusive thoughts and repetitive behaviors, is the OCI-R. Each item in the scale was responded to using the 5-point Likert scale where 0 indicated "Not at all" while 4 denoted "Extremely." Higher OCI-R scores indicated more severe obsessions and compulsions.

Anxiety Symptoms

The Beck Anxiety Inventory (BAI), developed by Beck et al. (1988), was utilized in assessing anxiety symptoms. The Beck Anxiety Inventory is a self-report inventory for evaluating the severity of anxiety symptoms. The inventory has 21 questions that assess common anxiety symptoms, such as fear, anxiety, and physiological arousal. Responses to each question were recorded using a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (not at all) to 3 (severely), depending on the frequency of the symptoms in the past week.

Coping Strategies

The Brief COPE Inventory by Carver (1997) was employed to assess coping mechanisms. One of the common scales used to determine an individual's ability to cope with stressors is the Brief COPE scale. The scale has 28 items that measure several coping techniques, including avoidance coping, emotion-focused coping, and problem-



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focused coping. Each question was answered by participants using a 4-point Likert scale that ranged from 1 (I haven't been doing this at all) to 4 (I have been doing this a lot). In earlier research, the Brief COPE has shown strong validity and reliability.

Procedure

Permission to perform the research was acquired from the appropriate authorities at the University of Gujrat prior to data collection. Following approval, the researcher invited students to participate in the study through online (Google forms). The purpose of the research was explained to participants, and they were asked to participate voluntarily. A consent form outlining the purpose of the study was given to those who consented to take part. Following their agreement, participants received a questionnaire booklet that included: A sheet with demographic data (age, gender, department, semester) ,The Revised Obsessive-Compulsive Inventory (OCI-R) ,The Beck Anxiety Inventory (BAI) COPE Inventory in Brief.

he questionnaires took about 15–20 minutes for each participant to complete. The researcher collected the completed questionnaires.

Ethical Considerations

Several ethical principles were followed throughout the research process to ensure the rights and well-being of participants.

Participants were informed about the purpose of the study before participation and provided written consent.Participation in the study was completely voluntary, and participants had the right to refuse or withdraw from the study at any time. All information collected from participants was kept confidential and used only for academic research purposes.Participants were not asked to provide identifying information such as their names, ensuring anonymity.The collected data were stored securely and used only for research purposes.

The study adhered to the ethical principles of the American Psychological Association (APA, 2017).

Results

Table:1 *Demographics of the participants*

Age	N	%
18-20	93	37.2%
21-25	157	62.8%
Gender		
Female	132	52.8%
Male	118	47.2%
Residential Area		
Rural	91	36.4%
Urban	159	63.6%

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Lower	72	28.8%
Middle	125	50.0%
Upper	53	21.2%

Table 2: linear Regression Analysis Predicting Coping Strategies (TOTALCSI) from Obsessive Thoughts (TOTALOCI) and Anxiety Symptoms (TOTALBAI) (N = 250)

Variables	R	R ²	F	β	B	t	p
Obsessive thoughts	.105	.011	2.769	-.105	-.142	-1.664	.097
Anxiety Symptoms	.073	.005	1.325	-.073	-.046	-1.151	.251

CSI is not significant predictor of OCI(p=.097)or GAD(p=.251) showing a weak non significant negative relationship with very small explained variance

Discussion

The present study aimed to examine the relationship between obsessive thoughts, anxiety symptoms, and coping strategies among university students. It was observed that there was a low negative correlation between the two variables (obsessive thoughts and anxiety symptoms) and the coping mechanisms. In addition, regression analysis showed that these two factors were insignificant predictors of coping mechanisms, as the amount of variance explained was minimal.

Nevertheless, this result contradicts some of the previous literature, which suggested a significant relationship between anxiety, intrusive thinking, and coping strategies. According to the cognitive-behavioral approach, negative thoughts, once they occur, can lead to an increase in anxiety and, thus, result in unhealthy coping responses like avoidance or rumination. However, the present study found no confirmation of this assumption.

There can be many reasons why this result was obtained. First, coping is a multidimensional phenomenon and is impacted by other factors apart from anxiety and intrusiveness. Thus, it might include different types of coping responses and be affected by personality traits, emotions, environment, etc. The students, especially those from non-Western countries, may use culturally-specific coping strategies like prayer and communal support systems, reducing the effect of anxiety and intrusive thoughts on coping. Second, it might also relate to the flexibility of coping techniques and depend on the ability to adjust one's behavior to circumstances.

Moreover, the insignificant findings might mean that although obsessions and anxieties are present in students, they do not necessarily hinder their ability to cope. There are some students who cope well despite the presence of such problems in their minds.

In general, the research has shown that coping mechanisms cannot be studied through an analysis of obsessions and anxieties alone. There should be a more holistic approach when dealing with issues related to student.



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Limitations

Nevertheless, there are some shortcomings of the study that need to be noted:

Firstly, the study utilized a convenience sampling method, which can affect the validity of the findings due to the non-representativeness of the participants' pool in relation to the general population of university students.

Secondly, the data was collected using self-report scales, which are likely to be biased because of various reasons, including social desirability and inaccuracies of self-perception. Participants might have reported fewer or more symptoms and coping strategies than they had actually experienced.

Thirdly, the study used a cross-sectional design, which prevents researchers from identifying causation between variables. There is no information whether obsessive thoughts and anxiety cause coping strategies or vice versa.

Fourthly, the study only included university students from one university, which might have affected the validity of the results due to the lack of variation among the respondents.

Fifthly, the study only examined a few variables (obsessive thoughts, anxiety, and coping strategies), while many others could have been considered to provide a better understanding of the phenomenon.

Conclusion

In summary, this research paper investigated the associations between obsessive thoughts, anxiety symptoms, and coping mechanisms in a group of university students. It was found that obsessive thoughts and anxiety symptoms are insignificant predictors of coping mechanisms. Thus, coping is affected by other more psychological or environmental variables in addition to those examined in the current study. It can be concluded that coping should be understood as a complicated and diverse process which is not directly dependent on such phenomena as obsessive thoughts and anxiety symptoms.

Future studies should consider using longitudinal designs to determine cause-and-effect relationships between variables and use other constructs, like resilience, personality traits, and social support. A wider sample across several institutions and diverse cultures would add to the robustness of findings.

In terms of implementation, universities should look into implementing an integrative mental health strategy that takes care of various aspects of psychological well-being, including coping strategies and managing emotions, instead of just addressing anxiety and obsessions.

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