

SOCIAL SUPPORT AND PSYCHOLOGICAL RESILIENCE: UNDERSTANDING THEIR ROLE IN REDUCING PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTRESS

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ABSTRACT

Early adulthood and university life expose students to significant psychosocial stressors. This study investigated the protective roles of perceived social support and psychological resilience against psychological distress among Pakistani university students, while evaluating gender differences across these variables. Utilizing a cross-sectional correlational research design, data were collected from 200 university students (50% men, 50% women; age range: 18–30 years) selected via purposive sampling. Data collection utilized the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS), the Brief Resilience Scale (BRS), and the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10), all of which demonstrated exceptional internal consistency in the sample. Pearson correlation analysis indicated that perceived social support and psychological resilience were significantly negatively associated with psychological distress. Linear regression models revealed that social support and psychological resilience significantly negatively predicted psychological distress. Furthermore, independent samples t-tests demonstrated significant gender differences: male students reported higher perceived social support and resilience, whereas female students experienced significantly higher psychological distress. These findings highlight the critical need for higher education institutions in Pakistan to implement targeted resilience-building programs, gender-sensitive support structures, and accessible campus counseling services to mitigate student distress.

I. INTRODUCTION

Early adulthood represents a critical developmental transition characterized by heightened exposure to academic, social, and financial stressors. Consequently, university students face an elevated risk of psychological distress—manifesting as anxiety, depression, emotional disturbance, and perceived stress—which significantly impairs academic performance and overall quality of life (Arnett, 2015; Karam et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2024). The World Health Organization (2023) has highlighted the escalating global prevalence of mental health challenges among young adults, underscoring the urgent need to identify protective psychosocial mechanisms that attenuate distress susceptibility and enhance adaptive functioning. Psychosocial adaptation depends on both external environment and internal psychological resources. Social support—defined as the transactional exchange of emotional, informational, and practical assistance within interpersonal networks (Roper et al., 2019)—serves as a primary external protective factor (Yuan, 2024). Grounded in the *stress-buffering hypothesis*, robust social connections

alter cognitive appraisals of stressors, rendering challenges less threatening (Karam et al., 2023). Strong ties with family, peers, and significant others bolster emotional regulation, reduce feelings of loneliness, and foster a sense of security (Dong et al., 2024; Wu et al., 2024). In collectivist societies like Pakistan, family structures provide substantial emotional and instrumental support; however, intense academic competition, societal expectations, and conditional family dynamics can simultaneously exacerbate psychological strain (Jameel et al., 2024; Usman et al., 2024).

Internal adaptive capacities, specifically psychological resilience, further moderate individual responses to stress. Resilience refers to the dynamic process of positively adapting to adversity, coping effectively with elevated stress, and recovering from trauma (Rutter, 2023). Aligned with *socio-ecological resilience theory*, resilience is not a static trait but a context-dependent capacity nurtured by environmental experiences and supportive social structures (Schafer et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2024). Resilient individuals are more inclined to utilize problem-focused coping strategies, maintain emotional stability, and actively seek support when facing challenges (Dong et al., 2024). Elevated psychological resilience consistently predicts lower levels of depression, anxiety, and distress across diverse clinical and non-clinical populations (Moisoglou et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2024; Zafar & Javed, 2023). Despite growing evidence supporting the benefits of social support and resilience, key literature gaps remain. First, most studies evaluate social support and resilience in isolation rather than modeling their combined protective mechanisms (Abate et al., 2024; Schafer et al., 2024). While social support fosters well-being, its efficacy often depends on internal psychological traits like resilience to translate external resources into reduced distress (Cao et al., 2024; Yang et al., 2024). Second, the majority of empirical work originates from Western paradigms, leaving the interplay of these variables underexplored within non-Western, collectivist academic settings such as Pakistan (Jabeen et al., 2024). Given the mental health stigma and limited counseling infrastructure in Pakistani higher education institutions (Imran et al., 2023; Jillani & Malik, 2024), an integrated model is needed to inform targeted institutional interventions.

Objectives

The primary objective of this study is to examine the integrated relationship between social support, psychological resilience, and psychological distress among university students in Pakistan. Specifically, this study addresses the following objectives and research questions:

1. To evaluate the bivariate relationships between social support, psychological resilience, and psychological distress among Pakistani university students.
2. To determine the joint predictive capacity of social support and psychological resilience in accounting for psychological distress.
3. To examine how social support and psychological resilience function interactively as protective mechanisms against distress.
4. To explore potential gender differences across social support, psychological resilience, and psychological distress within the target population.

II. METHOD

Participants

This study employed a cross-sectional correlational research design to examine the relationships among social support, psychological resilience, and psychological distress, and to determine the predictive capacity of social support and resilience on psychological distress among Pakistani university students. A sample of $N = 200$ university students aged 18 to 30 years was recruited from various universities across Pakistan using a purposive sampling technique. The sample was balanced by gender and comprised students enrolled across undergraduate and postgraduate degree programs. Detailed sample demographics are summarized in Table 1.

Table I: Demographic Characteristics of the Sample (N = 200)

Demographic Factors	<i>n</i>	%
Gender		
Men	100	50
Women	100	50
Educational Level		
Bachelors	101	50.5
Masters	72	36
PhD	27	13.5

Measures

A customized demographic sheet was administered to collect self-reported data on participant age, gender, educational level, and family structure. **[I]** Perceived social support was assessed using the 12-item Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support developed by Zimet et al. (1988). The instrument evaluates perceived support across three subscales: family, friends, and significant others. Items are scored on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*very strongly disagree*) to 7 (*very strongly agree*), with higher total scores indicating greater perceived social support. The scale demonstrates high internal consistency, with typical Cronbach's alpha reliability values ranging from .85 to .95 across diverse populations. **[II]** Psychological resilience was measured using the 6-item Brief Resilience Scale (Smith et al., 2008), designed for individuals aged 18 and older. Items are rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*), where higher scores reflect superior psychological resilience and ability to recover from stress. Reported Cronbach's alpha coefficients for the BRS range from .80 to .91. **[III]** Psychological distress within the anxiety and depression spectrum was evaluated using the 10-item Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (Kessler et al., 2002). Items are answered on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*none of the time*) to 5 (*all of the time*). Higher composite scores signify greater severity of psychological distress. The K10 exhibits high internal consistency, with reported Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranging between .90 and .93.

Procedure

Data were collected through personal administration of paper surveys and online Google Forms. Prior to data collection, participants were provided with a clear explanation of the study's objectives and explicitly informed that participation was voluntary. Written or digital informed consent was obtained from all respondents. Confidentiality and anonymity were guaranteed, with data reserved strictly for academic research purposes. Completion of the questionnaire battery required approximately 20 minutes per participant. All raw survey data were anonymized, coded, and entered into IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 26) for quantitative analysis.

III. RESULTS

Table II: Psychometric Properties of Scales (N=200)

Scales	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Range	Cronbach's α
Social support	55.94	23.96	12-44	.98
Psychological resilience	20.35	6.99	6-30	.93
Psychological distress	23.77	11.92	10-50	.97

Internal consistency and descriptive metrics were evaluated for all measurement instruments ($N = 200$). Reliability coefficients (Cronbach's α) ranged from .93 to .98, demonstrating strong internal consistency across scales. Normality assumptions were confirmed, as skewness and kurtosis values fell within the acceptable threshold of ± 2 .

Table III: Pearson Correlation in Variables (N=200)

Variables	1	2	3
1. Social support	-		
2. Psychological resilience	.85***	-	
3. Psychological distress	-.73***	-.59***	-

*** $p < .001$

Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to examine bivariate relationships among social support, psychological resilience, and psychological distress. Perceived social support displayed a strong positive correlation with psychological resilience ($r = .85, p < .001$) and a strong negative correlation with psychological distress ($r = -.73, p < .001$). Psychological resilience was also significantly negatively correlated with psychological distress ($r = -.59, p < .001$).

Table IV: Linear Regression Models Predicting Psychological Distress (N=200)

Model / Predictor	B	SE	β	R ²	F
Model 1				.54	232.85***
Constant	44.23***	1.45			
Social Support	-.36***	0.02	-.73		
Model 2				.35	110.23***
Constant	44.51***	2.08			
Psychological Resilience	-.10***	0.09	-.59		

*** $p < .001$ **Table V: Mean Differences and t-Test Results by Gender**

Variable	Men (M $\pm$ SD)	Women (M $\pm$ SD)	t(198)	p	95% CI [LL, UL]	Cohen's d
Social Support	70.56 $\pm$ 15.21	41.32 $\pm$ 22.15	10.87	.000	[23.93, 34.54]	0.77
Psychological Resilience	24.41 $\pm$ 4.89	16.30 $\pm$ 6.42	10.04	.000	[6.51, 9.70]	0.71
Psychological Distress	15.30 $\pm$ 4.89	32.24 $\pm$ 10.81	-14.26	.000	[-19.28, -14.59]	-1.01

Independent samples *t*-tests were computed to evaluate gender differences across the study constructs. Male students reported significantly higher levels of social support ($M = 70.56, SD = 15.21$) and psychological resilience ($M = 24.41, SD = 4.89$) compared to female students ($M = 41.32, SD = 22.15$ and $M = 16.30, SD = 6.42$, respectively). Conversely, female students demonstrated significantly higher psychological distress ($M = 32.24, SD = 10.81$) than male students ($M = 15.30, SD = 4.89$), exhibiting a large effect size ($d = -1.01$).

Summary of Hypotheses Testing

Table VI: Summary of Hypothesis Testing Decisions

No.	Hypothesis Statement	Outcome
H1	Significant correlations exist among social support, psychological resilience, and psychological distress.	Supported
H2	Social support is a significant negative predictor of psychological distress.	Supported
H3	Psychological resilience is a significant negative predictor of psychological distress.	Supported
H4	Significant gender differences exist across social support, psychological resilience, and psychological distress.	Supported

IV. DISCUSSION

The primary objective of this study was to examine the protective roles of perceived social support and psychological resilience against psychological distress among university students in Pakistan. Grounded in Hobfoll's

Conservation of Resources (COR) theory and the stress-buffering hypothesis, the empirical findings demonstrate that both external interpersonal assets and internal psychological capabilities significantly mitigate emotional distress, while highlighting marked gender disparities in psychosocial vulnerability within a collectivist academic context. Consistent with the first and second hypotheses, perceived social support exhibited a robust negative association with psychological distress and emerged as a primary negative predictor, accounting for 54% of its variance. These findings align with prior empirical literature indicating that robust social connections—encompassing family, peers, and significant others—serve as vital protective buffers against academic and personal stressors (Cai et al., 2025; Wu et al., 2025; Zaman & Khan, 2025). Within the framework of COR theory, external social resources provide students with emotional validation, instrumental assistance, and reduced feelings of isolation, thereby decreasing stress appraisal and vulnerability to anxiety and depression (Hobfoll, 1989; Surzykiewicz et al., 2022).

Similarly, the third hypothesis was confirmed: psychological resilience significantly negatively predicted psychological distress, accounting for 35% of the variance. Resilient individuals demonstrate superior cognitive reframing, active problem-focused coping, and emotional regulation, enabling them to navigate academic pressures, examination stress, and career uncertainties adaptively (Chan et al., 2022; Mealer et al., 2017). Furthermore, the strong positive correlation observed between social support and resilience ($r = .85$) underscores the socio-ecological perspective of resilience (Sun, 2025): supportive external environments actively foster internal psychological fortitude, which collectively shields students from adverse mental health outcomes (Naz et al., 2024; Schafer et al., 2024). A notable contribution of this study is the identification of significant gender differences across all target variables. Male students reported significantly higher levels of perceived social support and psychological resilience, alongside markedly lower psychological distress compared to female students. These results are consistent with prior regional and international studies (Jillani & Malik, 2024; Matud et al., 2022; Zhao et al., 2022). In the Pakistani sociocultural context, gendered socialization patterns often encourage self-reliance, emotional control, and broader social autonomy among men, facilitating problem-focused coping mechanisms (Liu et al., 2022; Sun et al., 2022). Conversely, female university students frequently face heightened domestic expectations, restrictive societal norms, and greater vulnerability to emotion-focused coping styles, compounding their psychological strain (Jillani & Malik, 2024; Sharma et al., 2025).

Theoretical and Practical Implications

- **Theoretical Contributions:** This research extends the applicability of COR theory and socio-ecological resilience frameworks to non-Western, collectivist academic populations. It demonstrates that external social support and internal psychological resilience function interdependently to attenuate psychological distress.
- **Institutional & Clinical Interventions:** Higher education institutions in Pakistan must establish accessible, stigma-free counseling services and structured psychological resilience workshops. Training focused on cognitive restructuring, emotional regulation, and stress management can enhance student adaptive capacities.
- **Gender-Tailored Support Systems:** Given the elevated distress levels observed among female students, institutional policy makers should implement targeted peer-mentorship networks, gender-sensitive mental health initiatives, and safe psychological spaces to foster female empowerment and distress reduction.

Limitations and Future Directions

- **Cross-Sectional Design:** The reliance on cross-sectional data limits the ability to draw definitive causal inferences regarding the temporal relationships between social support, resilience, and distress (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Longitudinal or experimental designs are recommended for future studies to track these dynamics over time.
- **Sampling Restrictions:** The sample size ($N = 200$) recruited via purposive sampling may limit generalizability across broader, diverse Pakistani student demographics. Expanding sample sizes across multiple provinces and institutions is advised.

- **Self-Report Measurement:** Data collection via self-report instruments introduces potential social desirability and recall biases. Future research should incorporate multi-informant reports or qualitative, mixed-method approaches to capture deeper contextual nuances.
- **Explanatory Scope:** Future empirical models should investigate potential mediating mechanisms (e.g., self-esteem, coping styles) or moderating variables (e.g., academic discipline, socioeconomic status) to provide a more comprehensive framework of student psychological well-being.

V. CONCLUSION

This study confirms that perceived social support and psychological resilience are vital protective factors against psychological distress among Pakistani university students. While strong social networks and internal resilience significantly alleviate emotional strain, pronounced gender disparities exist, with female students experiencing heightened vulnerability to distress. Proactive institutional strategies, gender-inclusive mental health policies, and resilience-building programs are essential to foster psychological well-being across higher education institutions in Pakistan.

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