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Exploring Perceived Stress as Determinant of Academic Performance among University Students

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Abstract

Academic performance of students can be influenced by perceived stress in more stressing academic environment. This paper examined how perceived stress is associated with academic performance among the university students in Balochistan in Pakistan and the difference between the genders. Convenient sampling was used to pick sample of 200 students (age range = 17-25 year). Data were collected using Perceived stress scale and Academic performance scale respectively. Analysis of data was done through Pearson correlation, linear regression analysis and independent sample t-tests. It was observed in the data that there was weak and negative but statistically significant relationship between perceived stress and academic performance. Academic performance did not vary between genders, however, females reported little higher level of stress. Through regression analysis it was observed that perceived stress was significant predictor of academic performance. The findings are discussed in the light of the previously reported findings on stress and academic performance. The findings also suggest the relevance of stress management in educational settings.

Keywords: Perceived Stress, Academic Performance, Gender Differences, University Students

Introduction

Due to several academic, social, and personal issues, university life involves a set of specific challenges that may induce a psychological burden in learners. Adaptation to new learning environments, high academic standards, financial aid, and development of new social relationships are the typical nature of transitioning to higher education (Misra & McKean, 2000). All these demands turn stress into such a common and practically unavoidable element of the everyday student life. There are various kinds of stress, but perceived stress has become topical among educational psychologists. Perceived stress can be explained as the subjective appraisal of stressful event and capacity to handle them by individuals (Cohen et al., 1983). In contrast to objective stressors as real-life external events, perceived stress is concerned with the way people perceive such stress-inducing events on an emotional level as well as in an intellectual way (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). This perception is subjective and it is important in determining mental health and academic performance of students. Some studies in multiple countries have revealed that a high rate of perceived stress usually relates to negative academic performance, low motivation, and emotional problems (Pritchard et al., 2003). Increased stress may worsen mental processes that require focus, recall, and decision-making, which are among the skills and abilities in academic success (Friedlander et al., 2007). Although having moderate amount of stress can be seen as beneficial in learning and motivation (Kaplan & Sadock, 2000) extreme levels of stress are associated with anxiety, depression, and poor performance of the

individual at the school (Niemi & Vainiomaki, 1999; Kelly & Clanton, 2001). It is quite well accepted that academic performance (measured by Grade Point Average (GPA) or examination scores on a high school level or, on a college level, by academic grades or by Grade Point Average (GPA) or on a college level by academic grades or by Grade Point Average (GPA)) is the most important indicator of student success and future career opportunities (Richardson et al., 2012). In addition to portraying intellectual capacity, academic outcomes reflect how students can cope with different stressors during the learning process (Saleh et al., 2017). The most frequently occurring stressors among the students in the university are academic stress, financial stress, time stress, and social stress (Ongori & Agolla, 2008; Stowell, 2003). Students are also exposed to even more pressures associated with financial instability, lack of education bases and social-political impacts in the countries like Pakistan, as well as in the under-resourced regions such as Balochistan (Ahmed et al., 2022; Rind & Ahmed, 2021). The students also develop perceptions and responses to stress based on their cultural backgrounds and family exposures (Fish & Nies, 1996; Rono, 2013).

Nonetheless, it is observed that there is a conspicuous lack of empirical studies that have been conducted in regard to the correlation between perceived stress and academic performance among university students within this region. Bearing in mind this research gap, this study focused on investigating the influence of perceived stress on academic performance of university students in Balochistan, Pakistan. In Particular, the study aimed to identify whether greater perceived stress is linked to a reduced academic performance. It was hoped that the findings would be helpful to educational institutions in devising approaches that could be used to handle stress among students in order to boost academic performance.

Theoretical Framework:
Transactional Model (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984): In the case of stress, one is said to be stressed when they are unable to change or cannot handle an event of some sort. ***Yerkes-Dodson Law (1908):*** Intermediate stress to the task can benefit the task itself but extreme stress to a task is detrimental to it.
Cognitive Load Theory (Sweller, 1988): A student may not learn well during the times of high strain because it may exceed the human capacity.
Self-Efficacy Theory (Bandura, 1977): Believing in your capabilities will reduce stress level and increase performance academically.

Literature review
Students at universities are frequent recipients of academic and personal stressors resulting in increased perceived stress- level of perceived stress in normal day-to-day life (Cohen et al., 1983). Stress is one of the issues identified in the province of Balochistan, where resources provided to students are already scarce. According to a study reported by (Kakar & Khan, 2022) in Quetta students who exhibited excessive stress possessed low-motivational levels, poor focus, and lesser GPA. One more study found that In Quetta, students became less involved due to stress set by money, long travels, and rigorous studies (Hassan & Gul, 2024). On the same note, (Baloch & Shoukat, 2020) indicated that insecurity about the future and exam pressure resulted in low academic performance. A recent study by (Soomro et al., 2020) comparing students in Balochistan and Sindh revealed that classroom stress was higher among students in Balochistan because of significant political and educational barriers and it adversely affected the academic performance of children. According to a study conducted by, (Khan & Rehman, 2019) the financial problems and family pressure added further to the stress level reducing the level of academic performance.
Conversely, another study conducted by (Rind & Ahmed, 2021) revealed that the strain of examination, mismanaging time, and a lack of direction affected the performance of the

students adversely. Similarly, (Zehri & Khalid, 2020) paper relates academic stress due to workload and family demands to poor performance and mental fatigue. In the same way, a study by (Mehmood & Kakar, 2018) also indicated that stress resulted in inappropriate participation and lower grades in postgraduate learners. In addition, students are also pressured by studies, resources shortages, politics, and money issues and end up with low grades (Ahmed et al., 2022). In another Study, it is found that stress decreases motivation and performance (Baloch & Yasir, 2021). In the same way, Medical students exhibited worse performance and experienced fatigue caused by stress (Khan et al., 2013). Nevertheless, the report by (Shahwani & Bibi, 2020) reveals that female students were more exposed to stress caused by cultural and safety concerns and significantly low marks. In a different study by, (Jan & Gul, 2019) the respondents reported that a lot of stress reduced motivation and GPA, especially in women students. Likewise, (Ahmed & Saeed, 2021) also discovered that the overstress was associated with poor grades and most likely among female students because of culture. On the whole, these studies demonstrate that excessive stress has detrimental outcomes on the academic accomplishment of students in Balochistan both owing to external pressures and absence of psychological with help. All several studies conducted in Pakistan revealed the negative relationship between perceived stress and academic performance. The stress in Pakistan was related to poor performance (Sohail, 2013). As the study administered in universities in Punjab, Karachi, Hazara, Lahore, and Islamabad demonstrates, the stress caused by exams, family demands, financial problems, and academic load greatly reduces the grades and the engagement of students (Khan & Munir, 2020; Naseem & Munaf, 2017; Saleem & Mahmood, 2013; Shah et al., 2018) Another study had it that, Anxiety, burnout, and dropout risk have also been linked to increase in stress levels (Jadoon et al., 2010).

Nevertheless, the effects can be alleviated with such coping strategies as problem-solving and social support (Raza & Sarwar, 2019). According to laboratory and field retraining results of Lahore (Ali et al., 2018) Islamabad (Zafar & Umer, 2020), and higher education institutions as NUST (Yousaf & Ahmed, 2019) academic overload, time pressure, and fear of failure decrease the academic achievements of students. A study conducted on female students (Ashraf et al., 2021) and a study conducted on medical students (Iqbal & Zubair, 2019) points out the family pressure and high academic workload as the relevant stress factors. On the same note, postgraduates in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and students who pursue business degrees in Karachi (Nawaz & Qureshi, 2017) share similar experiences about stress resulting in low. The research of Eastern countries also indicates that there is a high negative correlation between perceived stress and performance at school. The works in China (Lu, 1994) India (Kaur & Sharma, 2019) and South Korea (Lee & Larson, 2000) indicate that the perception of stress leads to depressed grades, emotional overload, and decreased participation mostly as a result of cultural prospects and pressure due to a test. It was also found out that exam and parental pressure led Indian students to perform poorly (Sharma & Wavare, 2017). In Hong Kong, stress was also a predictor of worse GPA and avoided learning (Cheung et al., 2011). Research conducted in western nations has reiterated a direct relationship between the high-stress levels among the university students and low performance. Declined GPAs and personal health problems are reported among students who report higher levels of stress in the U.S (Pritchard & Wilson, 2003). In the U.S., revealed finding was that high academic workload and time pressure have proved to reduce GPA (Misra & McKean, 2000). Similarly, stress and anxiety in the UK are proven to affect the academic performance extremely, especially during examination time (Andrews & Wilding, 2004). What is more, American students are linked to the deterioration of academic performance and mental well-being to stress (Beiter et al., 2015).

In the same way, Canadian and Australian researchers also conclude that exam stress negatively affects not only grades but also mood (Elias et al., 2011; Stallman, 2010). Last, (Richardson et

al., 2012) meta-analysis revealed that stress, anxiety, ineffective time management greatly forecasted lesser academic achievements.

Several regions have reported that there is an irresistible trend that women students at the universities have higher perceived stress than this perceived stress affects the people who are working at the universities and females are more significantly impacted in comparison to males. In Balochistan and Pakistan, it has been demonstrated by studies that females are increasingly subjected to cultural stress and family demands (Shahwani & Bibi, 2020; Saleem & Mahmood, 2013). According to another study, Female students tend to experience the domination of the stress compared to males (Naz & Saeed, 2020). The same trends occur in other Eastern societies such as India and South Korea where the negative effects of academic pressure are more severe among females (Sharma & Wavare, 2017; Lee & Larson, 2000). Females always record elevated stress levels and worse educational performance in Western research studies (Stallman, 2010; Beiter et al., 2015). On the whole, the factors of gender plays a great role in the affect that stress has on academic performance, and females are more affected by it than males. According to recent studies, mild levels of stress have the ability to improve scholastic achievements as they increase concentration, discipline and motivation. At Balochistan, (Kakar & Khan, 2022) identified that students who were in moderate amounts of stress had more excellent time management and focus on academics. (Rind & Ahmed, 2021) conducted another study along with its results showing better performance in the exams of moderately stressed students. Another study published by (Farooqi et al., 2012) in Pakistan, observed a non-linear relation between stress and performance as moderate level of stress produced better outcomes as compared to extreme stress levels. Likewise, (Ahmed & Saeed, 2021) indicated that moderate stress among Pakistani students motivated effortfulness and completing tasks in time. Still, in another research conducted in Azad Jammu & Kashmir, their work concluded that stress occasionally increased student performance (Qureshi & Khan, 2020). (Lu, 1994) has reported the presence of better performance in Chinese students subjected to moderate amounts of stress in the Eastern perspectives. This trend was also observed in India (Sharma & Wavare, 2017) and in Hong Kong (Cheung et al., 2011) where moderate stress assisted in concentration and solving problems. Not only Western studies (Yerkes-Dodson law, 1908; Robotham & Julian, 2006) mention an optimal stress area where performance excels, it also applies to a peak-performance range in stress. In general, mild stress seems to increase academic performance through increased motivation and effectiveness. In a similar way, cognitive and academic advantages under stressful conditions that could be handled was also established (Leblanc, 2009). In general, stress of low level seems to improve academic performance due to the increase of motivation and productivity.

Rationale of the Study

Students in universities are likely to encounter several academic issues, social and personal challenges which may result in stress and consequently lead to poor performance (Misra & Mckean, 2000; Cohen et al., 1983). International studies (Beiter et al., 2015) and national ones of Pakistan (Khan et al., 2013) confirm that the best academic results are connected with the lower stress level. But there is less research on this problem in the area of Balochistan where the students have additional problems such as the scarcity of resources and social issues. The study will assist to see the impact of stress on academic performance of university students in the province of Balochistan and recommend the support circle to the students.

Research Objectives

- To investigate link of perceived stress with academic performance among male and female student.

- To examine gender differences in perceived stress and academic performance among university students.

Hypotheses

H1. There is significant negative relationship between perceived stress and academic performance among university students

H2. Female university students perceive higher stress and lower academic performance compared to male university students

Methodology

The study relied on the quantitative correlational research design to determine the correlation between perceived stress and academic performance in university students in Balochistan, Pakistan. A convenience sampling was involved during the selection of the participants. Perceived stress was graded based on Perceived Stress Scale (PSS- 10) created by (Cohen et al., 1983), and the academic performance was gauged by Academic Performance Scale created by (Birchmeier et al.,) the participants included in the sampling were 200 male and female students. Analyses of data were done with the help of SPSS (Version 26). Professional ethics were also closely adhered to such as informed consent, confidentiality and the rights of participants to drop out of the study any time they see fit.

Results

Table 1. *Distribution of the scores for Perceived Stress Scale and Academic Performance Scale*

	Scales	Items	Mean	SD	α	Range		Skew(SE)		1	2
1	PSS	10	20.76	5.1069	.575	8	32	-.262	.172	-	-.25**
2	APS	8	30.30	4.1634	.620	18	40	-.090	.172		-

(N=200)

Note. PSS= Perceived Stress Scale; APS= Academic Performance Scale

Table 1 presents Scores Distribution of such Scales as Mean, Median, Standard Deviation, Range (min/max) and Skewness. The lowest value of PSS was 8 and highest was 32 whereas the lowest value of APS is 18 and the highest 40. The skew of significance was not found. Alpha correlation coefficient of scales applied in the current research. Perceived Stress Scale has a Cronbach's alpha value of .58. Academic Performance Scale strength of Cronbach Alpha is .62. Correlation coefficient value revealed that there exists a significant but weak negative relationship between the measured stress levels and academic performance measure ($r = -.255$, $p < .001$).

Table 2. *Differences in Mean and Standard Deviation of Scores of Male & Female on Perceived Stress and Academic Performance Scale (N=200)*

	Male (*n*=101)	Female (*n*=99)			CI 95%		
Scale	*M (SD)*	*M (SD)*	*t*(198)	*p*	*LL*	*UL*	Cohen's
1 PSS	20.33 (5.27)	21.19 (4.91)	-1.18	.238	-2.27	.568	.168
2 APS	30.44 (4.38)	30.14 (3.93)	.516	.607	-.85	1.46	.072

Note. PSS= Perceived Stress Scale; APS= Academic Performance Scale

This table 2 showed that female slightly scored more than male students (M = 21.19, SD = 4.91) in perceived stress scale compared to the male students However, the results show that there is no significant difference in the mean scores on Perceived stress scale [t (198) = -1.18,

p >.05, Cohen d = .168(< 0.20)]. Non-significant Mean scores difference [t (198) = 2.618, p <.05, Cohen d that is .072 (< 0.20)] was also revealed in Academic performance scale.

Table 3. *Regression Coefficient of Perceived Stress Scale and Academic Performance Scale (N=200)*

Variable	*B*	*SE*	β	R^2
Constant	34.54	1.19		
Perceived Stress	-.205	.056	-.251	.063

Note. PSS= Perceived Stress Scale; APS= Academic Performance Scale; = p<.001

The effect of Perceived Stress on Academics Performance is indicated in table 3. The value of R^2 of 0.063 showed that the predictor variable explained 6.3 per cent variance in the outcome variable and the model appeared significant at *F (1, 198) = 13.3, p <.001*. These results indicated that perceived stress was a minor but significant negative predictor of academic performance (β = -.251, p <.001).

Discussion

The purpose of the current study was to explore the relationship between perceived stresses with academic performance among university students. Some important findings were observed from the data. Descriptive statistics revealed students had moderate levels of perceived stress (M = 20.76, SD = 5.11) and performance (M = 30.30, SD = 4.16). The skewness values were within the acceptable ranges and this shows that there were no significant distributional problems. The analysis of reliability denoted moderate and reasonable internal consistencies for both the scales.

The assumption of the study was that higher level of perceived stress would be linked with lower academic performance. This hypothesis was confirmed in the findings, which showed a weak negative but statistically significant correlation between perceived stress and academic performance. Regression analysis revealed that perceived stress significantly and negatively predicted the academic performance. This yielded support for the hypothesis of the present study which assumed perceived stress as predictor of academic performance. These results are consistent with those found in preceding literature, which have reported negative associations between stress and academic performance. It was observed in a study that high academic stress leads to worse academic performance in the contexts of university students (Misra & McKean, 2000; Beiter et al., 2015). (Shah et al., 2018) observed that the students who are under more stress face difficulties in concentration, time management as well as motivation which hinders their academic performance.

The comparisons made based on gender revealed that there is no significant difference in perceived stress and academic performance of female and male students. Female students scored slightly higher on perceived stress whereas males had a slightly higher scores on academic performance. The trivial gender variations indicate that there is no big difference among the male and female students concerning stress and academic problems.

Conclusion

Finally, this study has demonstrate that high level of stress impairs the performance of the students and this finding applies across the gender. In the light of the findings, it is concluded that check on stress levels is critical for ensuring performance of the students.

Limitations and Recommendations

Like any other study, the present study also had some limitations. Its cross-sectional design that restricts the understanding of the relationship between stress and academic performance as causal. Second, this study include self-reported measurements that tends to be susceptible to the response bias. Lastly, the sample was restricted in terms of its geographical areas, and the findings could be limited concerning the generalizability.

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