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Exploring the Impact of Perceived Stress on Emotional Dysregulation among University Students

[1]Rahat M. Jamil -Email- rahatjamilpsy@gmail.com
[2]Dr. Benish Khan -Email- Benish.khan@hamdard.edu.pk
[1]M.Phil Scholar, University of Karachi
[2]Associate Professor, Hamdard University Main Campus Karachi.

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Corresponding Authors*:

The existing literature has consistently identified perceived stress as a significant psychological construct, examined across diverse populations and in relation to various psychological variables. The present study aimed to investigate the role of perceived stress in emotional dysregulation within a general population sample. Specifically, the primary objective was to examine the predictive relationship between perceived stress and emotional dysregulation. This correlational study utilized a sample of N = 40 participants (20 females and 20 males), recruited through remote convenience sampling. Participants ranged in age from 20 to 40 years. Data collection was conducted following informed consent and included the administration of a demographic information form, the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS; Cohen et al., 1983), and the Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale (DERS-18; Victor & Klonsky, 2010). The results indicated that emotional dysregulation was not significantly predicted by perceived stress, R^2 = .002, F (1,38) = .204, p > .05. Although the findings did not support a significant predictive relationship, they provide valuable insights into the dynamics of perceived stress and emotional regulation. These results may inform future research on psychological wellbeing and stress management, particularly with larger and more diverse population samples.
Key Words: Perceived Stress, Emotional Dysregulation, University Students.

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Introduction

The subjective perception of stress has been consistently linked to a wide range of psychological and physiological disorders, including but not limited to depression (Hewitt, Flett, & Mosher, 1992), social anxiety (Cohen, Kamarck, & Mermelstein, 1983), dermatological conditions such as skin picking (Singareddy et al., 2003), and male infertility (Band et al., 1998). Empirical research has further demonstrated that perceived stress can serve as a significant predictor of various negative health-related and psychopathological outcomes (Golden-Kreutz et al., 2005; Morrison & O'Connor, 2005).Chronic perceived stress has been shown to cause neurobiological changes in key brain structures. For example, it may heighten reactivity in the amygdala, which is associated with fear conditioning (Holzel et al., 2010), and alter the functioning of the prefrontal cortex, which is essential for emotion regulation (Liston, McEwen, & Casey, 2009). These alterations can impair emotional control, increasing the likelihood that stress will contribute to more severe psychological conditions. Thus, understanding perceived stress is crucial to addressing both psychological and physiological dysfunctions.

Emotion regulation—the capacity to manage and respond to emotional experiences effectively—is an important buffer against stress. Adults with higher emotional regulation abilities tend to experience fewer negative effects of stress on well-being and depression (Extremera & Rey, 2015). Yildiz et al. (2017) found that dysfunctional internal emotion regulation strategies (e.g., behavioral avoidance, problem-solving, and assistance-seeking) can mediate the relationship between perceived stress and psychological outcomes such as positivity.In academic settings, stress negatively impacts students' attention, concentration, motivation, class attendance, and overall academic performance (Matheny, Roque-Tovar, & Curlette, 2008). It also impairs cognitive capacities (Deligkaris et al., 2014) and contributes significantly to psychological distress (Heiman, 2004; Struthers, Perry, & Menec, 2000). When prolonged, stress may evolve into burnout syndrome, characterized by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal achievement (Maslach, 1999).Lazarus and Folkman (1984) conceptualized stress as a result of environmental demands exceeding an individual's coping resources. When such demands are manageable, they are viewed as growth opportunities; when overwhelming, they are perceived as threats. This appraisal process shapes the psychological experience of stress.

Emotions are inherent to everyday experiences, particularly in socially dynamic or challenging contexts. Emotion regulation—often a conscious, voluntary process—helps maintain functionality and comply with social norms. Studies across age groups using experimental and daily diary methods have shown the critical role of emotion regulation strategies in maintaining subjective well-being (Nezlek & Kuppens, 2008; Brans et al., 2013; Cutuli, 2014; Kalokerinos et al., 2015). However, less is known about how these strategies function in specific populations under interpersonal stress, such as university students. A meta-analysis of 79 studies by Houben et al. (2015) confirmed that emotional dynamics significantly influence well-being. Specifically, strategies such as cognitive reappraisal and suppression have been found to result in different psychological outcomes (Gross & John, 2003, 2004; Gross, 2015). Moreover, daily stressors have been linked to changes in emotional experiences and overall subjective well-being (Wrzus et al., 2015).

Emotion regulation is defined as the intrinsic and extrinsic processes through which individuals monitor, evaluate, and modify emotional responses to achieve personal goals (Thompson, 2008). According to Berking et al. (2008), emotion regulation ability includes

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skills such as actively modifying emotional states, accepting negative emotions, and maintaining resilience in the face of emotional adversity. While a certain level of stress may enhance motivation and performance, excessive stress can diminish psychological well-being. In competitive and isolating academic environments, students often perceive stress as overwhelming (Suldo et al., 2014), especially when personal resources are insufficient to manage stressors (Lazarus, 1966). Perceived stress arises from the belief that one cannot effectively control or cope with external demands (Sood, Bakhshi, & Devi, 2013). Coping styles can generally be categorized as approach- or avoidance-oriented. Approach strategies involve directly confronting stressors, whereas avoidance strategies involve cognitive or behavioral efforts to escape negative emotions (Herman, Hickmon-Rosa, & Reinke, 2017). Recent findings also show an inverse relationship between perceived stress and psychological well-being, with emotional instability mediating this association. Additionally, ego-resiliency has been identified as a partial mediator between perceived stress and well-being (Kozka & Przybyla-Basista, 2016). Students who balance multiple social roles have been shown to report lower levels of stress and higher levels of well-being (Greenhaus, Collins, & Shaw, 2003).

Rationale

In today's demanding academic environments, university students face increasing psychological, emotional, and social challenges. Whether stress arises from academic pressures, professional responsibilities, or personal struggles, its impact on students' daily lives and interpersonal relationships is undeniable. Given the integral role of mental and physical health in overall well-being, it is crucial to understand the detrimental effects of perceived stress one of the most influential negative factors identified in contemporary psychological research.

Despite the growing recognition of stress and emotion regulation as key contributors to psychological functioning, relatively few studies have explored the specific dynamics between perceived stress and emotional dysregulation in university student populations. This study aims to fill that gap by investigating how perceived stress influences the ability to regulate emotions, thereby contributing to a broader understanding of student mental health and informing the development of more effective support interventions.

Significance of the Study

The aim of this study was to investigate the predictive relationship of perceived stress with emotional dysregulation among university students and to explore their level of contribution of each other.

Research Questions

Present study is based on the following research question:

1)Is there any predictive relationship between perceived stress and emotional dysregulation among university students?

Hypotheses

HI-There would be a significant predictive relationship between Perceived Stress and Emotional Dysregulation among university students.

Methodology

This study has been pursued by following steps as bellow:

1. Questionnaire Selection
2. Participant Recruitment

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3. Assembling data
4. Analyzing data

Participants

Sample of present study has been comprised of 40 participants (20 female participants and 20 male participants). The sample has been recruited from online through remote, all over the Pakistan with university students. However, participants' ages ranged from 20 to 40 overall.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

1. Those individuals have been selected, who were not physically handicapped
2. Those individuals were included who is currently enrolled in the any university across the Pakistan.
3. Only those individuals have been selected, who were come under the age of 20-40 years.

Description of Measures

Demographic Information Form

It has been entailed for personal information and in personal information has been attained through contents such as age, gender, family structure and marital status.

Perceived Stress Scale (PSS; Cohen et al., 1983)

It is a 10 item scale measuring the perception of stress on a 5 point scale from never to quite often. Questions are directed on feelings and thoughts during the last-month and was administered in order to determine the participants' subjective stress experience. The PSS elicits responses to 14 items ranked on a five-point Likert scale (0¼ never, 1¼ almost never, 2¼ once in a while, 3¼ often, and 4¼ very often). The total score of the PSS is obtained by reversing the scores of items 4, 5, 6, 7, 9, 10, and 13 (in the following manner: 0¼ 4, 1¼ 3, 2¼ 2, 3¼ 1, and 4¼ 0) and subsequently adding the 14-item scores. A single score is achieved with higher scores indicating higher levels of perceived stress. According to Cohen et al. (1983), alpha (a) coefficients for this instrument range from .84 to .86, with a reported predictive validity ranging from .52 to .70. The PSS is a valid predictor of health-related outcomes that measure stressful life events.

Difficulties Emotional Regulation Scale (DERS-18; Victor, E., & Klonsky, D., 2016)

The DERS is a widely used self-report measure of emotion regulation difficulties. Items are rated on a scale from 1 (almost never) to 5 (almost always). Scores for each subscale and the total score are sums of the relevant items (with three items reverse-coded). Higher DERS scores reflect greater emotion regulation difficulties.

Statistical Analysis

Defined for each standard measure used in the study; Individual items and subscales are identified and data grouped for further understanding. After organizing and sorting the data, descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation and percentages) are used to get a better statistical picture of the characteristics of a sample of data in a concise form. In addition, linear regression is also used to determine the predictive relationship of perceived stress with emotional dysregulation . All statistical calculations were performed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS, V-22.0).

Ethical Consideration

This study was conducted in a manner that respects the dignity, rights and well-being of the people participating in this study; participants were assured of the objectives of this study. Participants were assured that all information disclosed during their participation was treated in strict confidence and had the right to remain anonymous.

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Result

Table# 01: Descriptive Characteristics Of Demographic Form

Characteristics		Frequency	Percentile
Gender			
	Male	51	51.0
	Female	49	49.0
Family Structure			
	Nuclear	49	49.0
	Joint	51	51.0
Marital Status			
	Single	55	55.0
	Married	38	38.0
	Divorced	06	6.0
Age [*m*=24.34]			
	20 Years Old	07	7.0
	21 Years Old	05	5.0
	22 Years Old	25	25.0
	23 Years Old	17	17.0
	24 Years Old	14	14.0
	25 Years Old	08	8.0
	26 Years Old	02	2.0
	27 Years Old	08	8.0
	28 Years Old	05	5.0
	29 Years Old	01	1.0
	30 Years Old	01	1.0
	32 Years Old	03	3.0
	35 Years Old	01	1.0
	38 Years Old	03	3.0

Demographic Form indicates that from the entire population there were 51% male, 49% female; on family structure the 51% were belonging to the joint and 49% with nuclear family setup; on marital status about 55% were single, 38% were married and 6% were divorced and age mean were 24.3 respectively.

Table# 02: Analysis of Predictive Relationship of Perceived Stress with Emotional Dysregulation

Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted Square	RStd. Error of the Estimate	Durbin-Watson
1	.046a	.002	-.008	9.428	1.107

a. Predictors: (Constant), Perceived Stress

b. Dependent Variable: Emotional Dysregulation

ANOVA[a]

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Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	18.090	1	18.090	.204	.653[b]
	Residual	8711.300	98	88.891		
	Total	8729.390	99			

a. Dependent Variable: Emotional Dysregulation
b. Predictors: (Constant), Perceived Stress

Coefficients[a]

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		
		B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
1	(Constant)	51.067	11.692		4.368	.000
	Perceived Stress	-.230	.510	-.046	-.451	.653

a. Dependent Variable: Emotional Dysregulation

Interpretation of Table No.2: The findings representing perceived stress have insignificant predictive relationship with emotional dysregulation (R2 = .002, F = .204, p > .05). The results of these calculations show that for emotional dysregulation 0% of the variance is expected from perceived stress, with 100% uncertainty. Furthermore, the observed emotional dysregulation beta value was -.04, which means that a 1-unit change in the independent social support variable increased emotional dysregulation by minus 4%. The table shows that the independent variable is insignificant relative to the dependent variable with 95% confidence intervals.

Interpretation of Table No.2: The findings representing perceived stress have insignificant predictive relationship with psychological wellbeing (R2 = .005, F = .493, p > .05). The results of these calculations show that for emotional dysregulation 0% of the variance is expected from perceived stress, with 100% uncertainty. Furthermore, the observed psychological wellbeing beta value was .071, which means that a 1-unit change in the independent social support variable increased emotional dysregulation by 7%. The table shows that the independent variable is insignificant relative to the dependent variable with 95% confidence intervals.

Discussion

Building on the existing literature, perceived stress has been identified as a critical factor affecting psychological well-being and emotional regulation—both of which are essential for leading a fulfilling and balanced life. The current study aimed to examine the predictive relationship between perceived stress, emotional dysregulation, and psychological well-being among university students across Pakistan. A total of 40 participants were included in this study, with an equal gender distribution (50% male, 50% female). Regarding family structure, 51% of participants came from joint families, while 49% belonged to nuclear families. Marital status distribution indicated that 55% were single, 38% married, and 6% divorced. The most frequently reported age was 22 years (25% of the sample), while ages 29, 30, and 35 each represented only 1%. The average age of participants was 24.34 years (see Table 01).

The first hypothesis stating that perceived stress would significantly predict emotional dysregulation was not supported. The statistical analysis revealed an insignificant predictive relationship with R^2 = .002, F(1,38) = .204, B = .04, p > .05,

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indicating that perceived stress did not significantly predict emotional dysregulation among university students (see Table 02). These findings align with prior studies (e.g., Katana et al., 2019; Kapıkıran, 2013) that reported inconsistent or context-dependent associations between perceived stress and emotional dysregulation across different populations and professional groups.

Limitations and Conclusion

Like all research, this study has certain limitations that must be acknowledged. First, the use of self-report instruments introduces subjectivity, which may influence the accuracy of responses. Participants may have responded based on perceived social norms or self-presentation biases, despite assurances of anonymity.

Second, the sampling method was based on online convenience sampling across multiple universities and departments in Pakistan. As such, the findings cannot be generalized to the broader university student population or to any single institution. Third, the demographic data collected were limited to gender, age, marital status, and family structure. Other relevant variables such as academic performance, socioeconomic status, or psychological history were not included and could have influenced the outcomes.

Fourth, the reliance on self-reported psychological well-being measures may be affected by social desirability bias, with some participants potentially presenting an idealized version of their emotional state. This might explain relatively high well-being scores, which may not fully reflect their actual experiences.

Conclusion

Despite its limitations, this study contributes to the growing body of literature exploring how university students manage stress and emotional challenges. While the results did not support a significant relationship between perceived stress and emotional dysregulation, the findings highlight the need for deeper investigations into the complex interplay of stress, coping strategies, and emotional well-being.

Promoting adaptive coping strategies such as planning, help-seeking, and active problem-solving can play a vital role in fostering psychological resilience among students. These strategies are particularly crucial in the university context, which involves a range of academic, personal, and social demands that increase vulnerability to stress (Carter, Kelly, Montgomery, & Cheshire, 2013; Moshki, Amiri, & Khosravan, 2012).

Future research should consider larger, more diverse samples and explore additional psychological and environmental variables that may mediate or moderate the effects of stress on emotional functioning. Doing so will provide more comprehensive insights into how students can be better supported in achieving emotional balance and academic success.

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