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Emotional Intelligence, Optimism, Meaning of Life, and Stress Levels among University Students

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Abstract

Students have adapted to academic stressors and social transitions alongside personal developmental requirements such stressors are required to be dealt with psychological resources that help facilitate mental and emotional health. This study investigated the relationships between emotional intelligence (EI), optimism, meaning of life and stress. Conducted at the GCU, UOL, Superior University and Riphah International University, Lahore Pakistan, to ensure relevance, the study was purposively sampled bachelor's and master's students between ages of 20 and 30. Data were collected through structured questionnaires included Perceived Stress Scale (PSS), Emotional Intelligence Scale (EIS), Life Orientation Test revised (LOT-R) and Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ). Independent sample t-test, Pearson Product Moment Correlation, Regression Analysis and Parallel Mediation Analysis (PROCESS Model 4) used to analyze the data. The results indicated that there is a significant negative correlation between EI and perceived stress, and positive correlation between EI and MIL. Findings revealed that optimism and meaning in life were not significant mediators of the relationship between EI and stress and failed to enhance model in any significant way. No prominent gender difference was identified. This gap can be due to change in socio-cultural factors such as more women being able to study and have professional careers. Challenges like cross-sectional design, one city sample, self-report and social desirability were also identified. Reducing research design to longitudinal and qualitative, investigating other mediators and examining intervention-based EI programs in different cultural or academic contexts should be considered in future research. In conclusion, it is demonstrated the necessity of establishing and integrating EI training regimes in universities as well as counseling services, and extracurriculars to improve the maintenance of stress, concept of life meaning and interpersonal skills by students.

Keywords: emotional intelligence; meaning in life; optimism; stress; university students; correlation; parallel mediation; regression analysis

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1.Introduction

Students at the university encounter a constant array of challenges - academic, social and personal development - that can strongly affect their mental health and overall welfare. Stress is widespread among this population group, expressed frequently as anxiety, anxiety levels and the sensation of overwhelm because of academic university tasks, economic problems plus uncertainty about career. These stressors are very important and the psychological resources available to deal with them are important in promoting resilience and mental health.

1.1. Emotional Intelligence

The authors Mayer, Salovey, and Caruso (2004) enumerate the first characteristics of EI as one: the perception of emotional states, the using of them for the sake of thought, even grasping of their nature, and good regulation of them. People with a high level of EI are more inclined to successful coping with stressful events, better handling of conflicts, and creating situations for the establishment of friendly relations. EI deals with cognitive skills that can be developed through training and practice, and not merely emotions, which makes it highly efficient when stress is faced and the person strives for self-improvement.

1.2. Meaning in Life

Another fundamental instrument in the human psyche is the presence of life meaning, which grants the person a feeling of goal, delight, and unity. According to Robert Nozick (1989) and other thinkers, meaning in life is achieved when individuals identify with something larger than themselves, such as their relations, artistic works, ethical standards, or community service.

1.3. Optimism

Optimism is yet another form of defence. Carver and Scheier's (1987) definition of dispositional optimism is that it is a global belief that good things will happen. Optimistic people are more likely to use the problem-focused coping strategy, sustain their efforts during the tough times, and retain emotional control.

As pronounced in Seligman's (1991) theory of learned optimism, some people are naturally endowed with the optimistic trait, whereas others can get the hang of it through changing their explanatory styles.

1.4. Stress

In simple terms, the picture of stress in the human psyche is a combination of hardwired external pressures and the ways people think of and react towards them. Bheemaiah and Venkataiah (2020) mentioned that stress is not transient emotional reaction now but a complicated psychological and physiological state that can effect decision-making, productivity, physical and emotional health. The psychological point of view on stress shows that it relates to the cognitive appraisal of stress. People decide if something is dangerous and whether they have resources to face it. In line with the transactional model of stress, the degree of stress that individuals experience depends largely on this appraisal process. Hence, if an individual decides that the challenge is manageable, his or her stress might be of a short duration or not so severe. On the other hand, if the person's perception is that the challenge is too difficult and beyond his/her control, he/she may become anxious, burnt out, or suffer from other psychiatric disorders (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, as cited in Bheemaiah & Venkataiah, 2020).

The purpose of the study is to comprehend how these psychological constructs affect resilience, academic performance, and overall well-being via their analysis. It assumes

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that greater levels of optimism, life significance, and EI will correlate with lower stress levels. The study is justified on both theoretical and practical grounds: a greater understanding of these protective factors can inform interventions aimed at improving students' coping mechanisms, mental well-being, and academic performance.

2. Literature Review

By analysing past research on Emotional Intelligence (EI), optimism, meaning in life, and stress, this chapter offers valuable insights into how these psychological constructs influence university students' mental health and academic performance. Understanding these relationships enables researchers to develop evidence-based interventions that enhance students' emotional resilience and coping mechanisms. Additionally, the literature review ensures the study builds upon existing knowledge, strengthens arguments with empirical evidence, and highlights the significance of addressing these variables in higher education settings

The research carried out by Llego and Corpus in 2019, data showed students who demonstrate superior emotional intelligence achieve lower stress levels since those in the highest emotional intelligence group reduced their stress perception by 40%. Llego & Corpus (2019) promote emotional intelligence programs for nursing education because they offer students both stress management abilities and academic success (Llego & Corpus, 2019).

Arslan et al. (2020) investigated the link between meaningful life perceptions and mental health in university students through their research. Research shows that students who discover meaning in their lives experience decreased anxiety and depression symptoms to the extent of reducing their anxiety by 30 percent.

The study by Liu et al. (2023) investigates in their study how emotion regulation acts as a mediator between values and emotional adjustment. The study reveals that people with self-transcendence values show better emotional adjustment because these values lead to better emotion regulation regulators which results in a 20% increase on emotional adjustment measurement scales

Universities can transform the students into stronger individuals with better mental health through improving their explanatory flexibility and attitudes. When both studies are combined, they confirm the hypothesis that college students have been found to gain by emotional intelligence and optimism as the key factors that enhance resiliency and reduce stress. When created through intentional efforts, these concepts can add significant value to academic performance, personal growth and lifetime well-being.

Below are the objectives of research study:

1. Investigate relationship between emotional intelligence, having a sense of purpose in life, optimism and stress levels of university students.
2. Compare the degrees of emotional intelligence, optimism and the sense of meaning in life across various demographic groups (male/female, age).
3. How do optimism and meaning in life function as psychological mechanisms in reducing stress, fostering resilience, and promoting goal-directed behaviours.

The theoretical rationale for this research is based on the knowledge that emotional intelligence, optimism and meaning in life are crucial psychological resources to the advantage of enhancing resilience and reducing stress. Emotional intelligence allows to manage emotions efficiently to think critically and optimistically measured by the optimism enables one to see the good in situations, to believe that everything has its

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positive side and encourages proactive behaviors. Having life meaning with purpose and direction, forming a psychological buffer against danger. This study seeks to add to the existing literature knowledge of how these influences enhance each other by looking at how each of these elements operates.

The practical reason for this research is to figure out the relationship between emotional intelligence, optimism and meaning in life in making stress manageable. This aims to help create effective tailored interventions and support systems. These results can inform educationalists in plans for developing an extra supportive educational setting in which both academic success and mental health are promoted. Adding, the findings can form policy about the direction in which mental health support in schools or colleges is directed, so resources are arranged efficiently to tackle student requirement and promote long-term consequences beyond university years.

3. Methods

This research was carried out to investigate the association between emotional intelligence, optimism and meaning in life in university students experiencing psychological stress levels. There were operational definitions that were used to attain accuracy of measurement. Emotional intelligence (EI) was measured with the Emotional Intelligence Scale (Schutte et al., 1998) that is characterized as the capacity to perceive, manipulate, and control own emotions, as well as to discern those of others. Optimism was defined as optimism describing one factor of the optimism-pessimism trait (Scheier, Carver, & Bridges, 1994) and captured through the Life Orientations Test-Revised (LOT-R) (Scheier, Carver, & Bridges, 1994). The purpose, coherence, and significance of life were assessed through the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ) (Steger et al., 2006). Stress levels were measured by substituting the items lack of predictability, no sense of control, or overload instead of the 10 items of the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS-10) (Cohen et al., 1983). The correlational research design was used in the investigation to analyse the relationships between the variables without the manipulation of any (Creswell, 2014). The sample consisted of 202 university students (117 women, 85 men) between the ages of 20 and 30 years (M = 23.03, SD = 2.39) who studies in four universities in Lahore, Pakistan. Respondents were in undergraduate or postgraduate degree programs. Purposive sampling was adopted where several individuals who met the inclusion criteria were selected only.

Data were gathered through structured questionnaires. Participants gave their informed consent and took surveys in a quiet place and researcher was present to respond to any questions that they might have. Using the 33-item EIS, EI was assessed; optimism with the 10-item LOT-R; meaning in life with the 10-item MLQ, which included Presence and Search of Meaning subscales, and stress with the 10-item PSS. All instruments showed a strong reliability and validity in prior works. Data were analysed with SPSS The descriptive statistics provided the summary of demographic features and the scores of scales. Pearson correlations were used to investigate the associations between variables and the independent samples t-tests were used to compare males and females. Mediation was examined utilizing the PROCESS Model 4, to determine whether optimism and meaning in life mediated the relationship between EI and stress. The hierarchical regression established the role of predictive contributions of each variable. Approval obtained from the university's ethical review board. Confidentiality and anonymity of the information were assured to the participants of this research study. The implications and objectives were fully clarified to them. An informed consent was duly signed by the participants,

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indicated research details, thus inferring that the participants understood their rights as research participants. No one was harmed during data collection. No incentives or rewards were promised in this research to the participants.

4. Results

Table 1 showed a total of 202 university students participated in the study, of which there are 117 females (57.9 %) and 85 males (42.1 %). Most of the respondents were aged 20 to 24 years (79.2 percent) with 51 percent pursuing master's degree programs. The participation of female was somewhat greater, especially, student age group 25-30 and masters level. The sample mean age amounted to 23.03 years (SD 23.39) i.e., there was a young adult population in university - a balanced population across education levels.

Table 1: Frequency (f), and Percentage Value (%) of the Demographic Characteristics of the Male and Female Participants (n=202) (crosstabs)

		Females	**Males**	**Total**
Variable	Categories	*f (%)*	*f (%)*	*f (%)*
Gender		117(57.9)	85(42.1)	202(100)
Age	20-24	88(55.0)	72(45.0)	160(79.2)
	25-30	29(69.0)	13(31.0)	42(20.8)
Education	BS	49(49.5)	50(50.5)	99(49.0)
	MS	68(66.0)	35(34.0)	103(51.0)

In table 2 all the measurement Scale showed acceptable internal consistency Internal consistency or Cronbach alpha was 0.82 on the Emotional Intelligence Scale (EIS), 0.78 on the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ), 0.62 on the Life Orientation Test-Revised (LOT-R) and 0.76 on the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS). Skewness values demonstrated that scores in EI, MLQ, and LOT-R were negatively skewed, which means that these values were higher among the participants, and PSS scores were approximately normally distributed. To analyse the parametric tools further, these outcomes were justified.

Pearson correlations (table 3) showed that there was a slight negative relationship between emotional intelligence and perceived stress ($r = -0.15$, $p = .033$) so that higher emotional intelligence was related to a reduced stress level. EI was also highly and positively associated with meaning in life ($r = 0.56$, $p < .001$). None of the correlations between the perceived stress and the meaning in life ($r = -0.08$, $p = .251$), or between optimism and any of the remaining variables were significant.

The Independent sample t-tests also showed that gender did not differ significantly on emotional intelligence, meaning of life, optimism and perceived stress. The effects varied between negligible and small in all possible comparisons, indicating the insignificance, or even similarity, of the responses on these psychological measures, by male and female students (see table 4).

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Table 2: Chronbach's Alpha Coefficient, Mean (M), Standard Deviation (SD), and Skewness Values for the EI, MLQ, LOT-R and PSS (n=202)

Scales	Items	*M*	SD	*a*	Skew	Range	
						Actual	Potential
EI	33	120.8	12.9	0.82	-0.78	148-77	165-33
MLQ	10	50.9	8.8	0.78	-0.44	70-22	70-10
Presence of Meaning	5	24.7	5.3	0.74	-0.32	35-10	35-5
Search for Meaning	5	26.1	5.5	0.77	-0.82	35-7	35-5
LOT-R	6	14.6	3.2	0.62	-0.42	23-3	24-0
PSS	10	25.6	5.5	0.76	0.10	38-14	40-0

Table 3: Pearson Product Correlation among EI, MLQ, LOT-R, and PSS

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. PSS	-	-.150*	-.081	-.054	-.066	-.067
2. EI	-	-	.561**	-.073	.511**	.405**
3. MLQ	-	-	-	-.006	.810**	.820**
4. LOT-R	-	-	-	-	-.022	.012
5. Presence of meaning	-	-	-	-	-	.329**
6. Search for meaning	-	-	-	-	-	-

In table 5 mediation analysis in parallel through the PROCESS Model 4 showed that both meaning in life and optimism did not mediate the interrelationship between emotional intelligence and perceived stress. Hierarchical regression (table 6) indicated that only emotional intelligence had significant influence on perceived stress (R^2 = 0.022, p = .033) with the addition of meaning in life and optimism being insignificant. Emotional intelligence was shown to be a significant factor of lower stress levels whereas meaning in life and optimism did not play a significant role in stress levels in this sample.

Table 4: Means, Standard deviation and t-scores of EI, MLQ, LOT-R and PSS scales based on gender (n=202)

Variables	Females n=117		Males n=85				95% C.I		
	M	SD	M	SD	t	p	L.L	U.L	Cohen's d
EI	121.08	13.0	120.5	12.7	.26	0.79	-3.14	4.12	0.04
MLQ	51.3	8.5	50.4	9.3	.76	.44	-1.53	3.46	0.11
LOT-R	14.4	3.1	14.9	3.5	-1.0	0.30	-1.41	.43	0.15
PSS	25.4	5.5	25.9	5.4	-0.6	0.53	-2.03	1.06	0.09

P<0.01, df =200

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Table 5: Direct and indirect effects of EI on PSS with MIL and LOTR as the Mediator

Effect	coefficient	SE	*t*	*p*	LLCI	ULCI	*β*
Total Effect (c)	-0.0638	0.0298	-2.14	0.034	-0.1226	-0.0050	-0.1497
Direct Effect (c')	-0.0676	0.0362	-1.87	0.063	-0.1391	0.0038	-0.1587
Indirect Effect (a*b)	0.0038	0.0196	-	-	-0.0359	0.0423	0.0090
Via MIL	0.0018	0.0192	-	-	-0.0363	0.0392	0.0042
VIA LOT-R	0.0020	0.0037	-	-	-0.0041	0.0112	0.0048

Table 6: Hierarchical Regression Analysis Of Predictors Of Perceived Stress

Predictors	B	95% of C.I L.L	U.L	β	R^2	ΔR^2
Step 1 Constant	33.3	26.217	40.503			
Emotional Intelligence	-.064	-.123	-.005	-.150		
					.022	0.22
Step 2 Constant	33.3	26.173	40.524			
Emotional Intelligence	-0.65	-.136	.006	-.152		
Meaning in Life	.003	-.101	.106	.004		
					.022	.000
Step 3 Constant	35.1	27.017	43.357			
Emotional Intelligence	-.068	-.139	004	-.159		
Meaning in Life	.005	-.099	.108	.008		
Optimism	-.109	-.341	.123	-.065		
					.027	.004

These findings imply that there are improvements in the perceived stress levels of university students with a higher emotional intelligence regardless of gender. Both

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emotional intelligence and meaning in life were closely associated with each other but optimism alongside life meaning could not mediate the relationship between emotional intelligence and stress. The findings indicate that emotional intelligence is the key to stress management among the university students, and the intervention focused on emotional intelligence could promote the mental health of students.

5. Discussion

The current correlational research was able to determine the connection between emotional intelligence (EI), optimism, meaning in life (MIL) and perceived stress in students (university campus) regarding possible gender variation. The results supported first hypothesis as the research revealed a negative relationship between EI and perceived stress that was significant; hence, students with higher levels of emotional intelligence are less stressed. In the line with previous research, indicating that emotional awareness and regulation can effectively help an individual in a stressful condition (Chung et al., 2020). Furthermore, second hypothesis partially supported, a positive association was found between meaning in life and EI, but optimism did not show a significant correlation, which is to indicate that the more a student perceives his or her life as meaningful, the higher his/her level of EI will be. These findings confirm theoretical constructs forming a connection between emotional thought and existential awareness and achieve-oriented behaviour.

Third hypothesis was also partially confirmed. Result showed that higher stress levels were significantly linked to lower EI, but optimism and meaning in life were not connected with stress in our dataset. Thus, EI emerged as key protective factor against stress.

The findings did not support the fourth and fifth hypothesis. Unlike in prior studies, the study failed to find any major differences between genders regarding their perception of stress/EI/optimism or meaning in life. Whereas previous literature shows that females have a higher likelihood of being affected by stress and depression following adolescence (Angst et al., 2002; Nolen-Hoeksema & Girgus, 1994), the present results imply that the demographic realities of Pakistan including enhanced learning and work opportunities given to women, may contribute to the minimization of inequalities between the two genders.

Hierarchical regression, sixth hypothesis, supported EI as a main predictor of stress as it explained 2.2 percent of variance and optimism together with the meaning in life were unable to contribute to the model. The results indicate that the effect of Optimism and life purpose on the long-term psychological well-being may not be successfully realized, but that relying on EI helps in managing the stress of young adults and plays a more immediate, practical role.

Last hypothesis was also confirmed by the findings of this dataset. Parallel mediation analysis showed that the relationship between EI and stress reduction is mainly direct and there is no significant contribution of optimism (LOT-R) and meaning in life. These factors point out to the fact that immediate cognitive and social skills, including self-awareness, emotional regulation, empathy, and interpersonal skills, play a significant role in dealing with the day-to-day stress in university. The effect was, however, not significant in the mediation via MIL and LOT-R and the direct effect ended up being marginally significant when the mediators were contained. This implies that EI plays a positive role in alleviating stress without needing to positively affect any increase in optimism or life purpose perception. This direct association could be an indication of distinct emotional

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and social burdens of university life, including how to cope with academic pressure, maneuver peer relations, and practice personal tasks. Students that possess a higher EI can better identify and control their feelings in stressful circumstances and therefore can tolerate stress related to university life more easily. Less optimistically, meaning in life and optimism can be broader existential or future-focused concepts that remain fragile and incomplete in young adults, and who might not be defended against daily stress in the immediate future. Swami, Mathur, and Pushp (2013) demonstrated that perceived stress mediates the relationship between trait emotional intelligence and burnout among resident doctors in India. Moreover, emotional intelligence also enables students to form interpersonal skills, one of the established protective measures against learning stress (Chung et al., 2020).

5.1. Implications

Practical implications of the study lie in the importance of EI development programs that can be used to make students withstand pressure, feel a sense of direction, and develop better interpersonal skills. Colleges can incorporate these activities into counselling programs, course work, or extra-curricular seminars to help them succeed at school and have healthy, sustainable lives.

5.2. Limitations and Suggestions

The limitation to the study is cross-sectional design, the single-city sample, and the self-report measures, and the poor reliability in the optimism scale. Cultural, contextual and technological factors are not studied, and the cause-effect correlations cannot be drawn. To advance research in the field, future research endeavours should utilize longitudinal and qualitative methods, investigate the role of additional mediators, that is, coping strategies, resilience and social connectedness, and compare findings in other cultures and academic fields. It is also suggested to conduct interventional studies that will evaluate EI training and programs of peer mentoring, as well as training of emotional regulation as they could potentially prevent stress and improve the general student well-being.

This study further supports the fact that emotional intelligence is central in reducing perceived stress and the sense of life purpose among students in universities. Although optimism and sense of meaning in life are relevant to long-term well-being, immediately relevant emotional capabilities provided by EI are relevant to coping with daily scholarly and social stresses. Such findings can be used to create specific interventions to support students and their psychological resources, academic achievements, and mental well-being in general.

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