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Bullying in Higher Education; Examining its Relationship with Psychological Distress and Social Anxiety in University Students

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Abstract

Bullying is an important issue in higher education, with heavy consequences for student's mental health, well-being, and academic success. This study investigates the correlation between bullying incidents and psychological distress levels among higher level students, with an eye of focus on social anxiety. A mixed-methods approach was employed, combining both quantitative and qualitative data. The results show that many of students experienced cyberbullying, with significant differences in gender. Bullying experiences were positively correlated with psychological distress levels, and social anxiety. Demographic and environmental factors, such as gender, university support systems, and prior experiences of bullying, influenced the relationship between bullying, social anxiety, and psychological distress. The qualitative data revealed stages of isolation, fear, helplessness, and emotional distress among bullying victims, highlighting the need for effective mechanisms and support systems. The study highlights the need for universities to develop and implement evidence-based anti-bullying strategies, mental health support services, and coping mechanisms to promote students' well-being and academic success. The findings contribute to the existing literature on bullying in higher education, emphasizing the importance of addressing social anxiety and psychological distress in university settings.

Key words: *Bullying, Social Anxiety, Psychological Distress, Mental Health, Well-being, Coping Mechanisms*

1. Introduction

The issue of bullying has become one of the focus of concern for many individuals such as the government, teacher and communities mostly because the impacts of bullying behaviors have an influence on the academic, social and even emotional wellbeing of the victims (Boulton et al. , 2010). Cases of physical and non -physical violence using learners within the educational setting have been noted. The bullying actions, such as: The behaviors such as mocking, teasing, fighting, disrespecting other individuals and so on, are common at school and universities.

According to Olweus; there are three characteristics that always exist in the act of bullying are: Bullying involves the following factors; (1) intention to harm, (2) dominance of the bully over the victim and (3) repetition of the act Olweus (2013) explains that bullying can occur at any stage in life.

1.1 Definitions and Forms of Bullying

Despite the increasing attention paid to bullying in a higher education context, researchers have not yet reached consensus on how to best define the phenomenon, and the definitions utilized to measure it have differed across studies. Bullying definitions are based on either the school or business environment and emphasise three aspects of the phenomenon: A classic example of organised bullying is shown below: (a) The target person becomes the victim of aggressive behaviour or intentional / goal-directed harm by the perpetrators; (b) The harm is done repeatedly; and (c) The target is not completely powerless against the perpetrators because there is a power differential between the two (Gredler 2003).

Many forms of bullying are present in university level student and includes such behaviours as: bullying, teasing, making fun of a person based on their race or colour, gender, disability, or their religious beliefs, or homosexuality; isolating a person; sexually harassing someone; following a person and frightening them; physically or verbally harassing someone; disclosing information about a person who confided in someone else (Cowie & Myers, 2016a, 2016b). In physical bullying, the abusers employ force in an effort to harm the targets physically. On the other hand, verbal bullying as one of the prominent types of bullying entails acts like calling the victim nasty names, constantly provoking him or her, spreading rumors, using racism or sexism. In the course of such bullying, there are rumours, backbiting which are said or told on purpose to harm (Shaw et al , 2013).

1.2 Significance of the Study

It is important to research how bullying affects social anxiety and psychological distress in higher education for a number of reasons. First of all, it promotes a more comprehensive approach to students' well-being by guiding in the identification and understanding of the mental health issues that university students face.

In addition, the correlation between bullying and psychological distress/social anxiety allows for the development of more effective and specific interventions or communities within educational settings. Students can be safer and encouraged to learn and grow as a result, which can foster academic achievement as well as personal growth among learners. Furthermore, research in this area can give valuable new insights to educational strategies and procedures and compels institutions to act before incidents like these occur and promote a tolerant attitude towards people of different race. Therefore, enhancing academic performance as well as well-being of students in higher learning institutions can be achieved by working on the impacts of bullying on mental health.

1.3 Hypothesis

H₁: There will be a positive relationship between bullying experiences and psychological distress levels among university students.

H₂: The presence and severity of social anxiety in university students will be positively associated with their experiences of bullying.

H₃: There will be significant differences in the scores of various scales used to measure bullying, social anxiety, and psychological distress based on gender among university students.

2. Psychological Distress and Social Anxiety in University Students

The distress that students at universities experience is widespread and complex and has an effect on their psychological wellbeing. It is thereby postulated that increased degree of psychological distress could be attributed to scholastic pressures, sociological transition, and economic strains inherent with university life. Various researchers provide evidence that the level of mental distress among university students is high on an international level. A report by Auerbach et al. (2018) cites a global meta-analysis of university students' psychological experiences revealing that about one-third of them experience significant psychological distress over the course of their education. Institutions of learning are not left out of this anguish; it has many effects on them, and it manifests in various ways including anxiety, sadness, and emotional instability.

2.1 Academic Pressures

Among the significant sources of psychological distress is the presence of academic-related tasks. Stressful situations are possible due not only to competitive conditions in the sphere of higher education and the subsequent load, examinations, and performance requirements (Dyrbye et al., 2010). Students are pressured to do well academically and fear not performing well, thus the students' psychological pressure.

From this paper we can identify that transition from high school to a university entails other responsibilities such as; increased independence, social transformation and course work. Education affects those students who have some problems with the new way of life and studying; thus, they may experience higher levels of stress related to these challenging changes (Hunt & Eisenberg, 2010).

2.2 Financial Stress

A good part of the psychological stress stems from financial constraints, shelter, food and any other expense, tuition fees, and the burden of student loans. Hunt et al. (2018) also notes that students with limited financial resources may not be able to manage their course work properly which may worsen their mental health problems.

3. Factors Contributing to Psychological Distress, Social Anxiety

3.1 Bullying and Academic Pressures

It is quite evident that the failure to meet these two basic needs can cause significant psychological distress. In their paper, Smith et al. (2017) argue that relational bullying, for instance, social exclusion based on performance in academics, and verbal bullying, in this case, insults concerning performance in class both result in high stress levels and a decline in mental health. Bullying and psychological torment are interrelated in that they are both a consequence of, and originating from, social exclusion. Bullying can socially exclude students meaning they become lonelier and stressed, and not only that, but it also makes them more miserable. Rodebaugh et al. , (2014) also noted that there is a likelihood of being bullied by others if one is a socially anxious person.

Academic bullying can arise from the presence of perfectionistic inclinations, which are frequently associated with psychological discomfort. Perfectionistic inclinations can be exacerbated by bullying behaviors that establish unreasonably high standards or target a student's academic accomplishments, which can increase distress levels (Stoeber & Damian, 2014). Universities need to give priority to comprehensive mental health support systems in order to fully address the intricate interactions that exist between psychological discomfort, social anxiety, and bullying. This comprises educational initiatives, easily accessible therapy programs, and laws that exactly fights bullying in all of its appearances. Fostering a secure and supportive learning environment requires establishing a culture of empathy, support, and de-stigmatizing conversations about mental health.

3. Methodology

This study employs a quantitative research methodology, utilizing statistical techniques to analyze data and applying deductive reasoning grounded in cognitive theories, such as cognitive appraisal and attribution theory. The research centers on "Bullying in Higher Education: Examining Its Relationship with Psychological Distress and Social Anxiety in University Students." Secondary data sources encompass Google Scholar, ISI Web, online libraries, HEC digital libraries, newspaper articles, reports, website articles, and magazine articles. Participants were university students from Mardan, selected through convenience sampling. Data collection was conducted using a demographic questionnaire to capture details such as age, education level, and types of instructor bullying. The study utilized several scales for measurement: the Social Interaction Anxiety Scale (SIAS) to assess social interaction anxiety, the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10) to evaluate psychological distress, and the Bullying and Cyberbullying Scale for Adolescents (BCS-A) to measure victimization and perpetration in both offline and online contexts. Ethical considerations were rigorously adhered to, including obtaining permissions from scale authors and university authorities, securing informed consent from participants, and ensuring confidentiality and the right to withdraw at any time. Statistical analyses comprised descriptive statistics for demographic variables, Pearson correlation to explore the relationship between instructor bullying and psychological distress, hierarchical regression to predict levels of distress, and ANOVA to test for group differences based on coping mechanisms and responses to bullying.

4. Results

This chapter presents the research findings, including the demographic profile, correlation analysis, and regression analysis of the participants. The study involved 150 respondents out of 200 distributed questionnaires, using convenient sampling. The gender distribution was nearly equal, with 52% males and 47% females, ensuring balanced representation. Most participants were aged 18-22, typical of undergraduates, but 33% were aged 23-27, indicating the presence of mature or postgraduate students. Only 9% of respondents were married, reflecting the expected demographics of largely unmarried undergraduates. All participants held bachelor's degrees, ensuring a

consistent educational background for analysis.

4.1 Demographic Information

Table 1: Demographic Information of the Respondents

Characteristics	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Male	79	52%
Female	71	47%
Age		
18-22	99	67%
23-27	49	33%
Marital Status		
Married	13	09%
Unmarried	137	91%
Education		
Bachelor	150	100%

N= 150 , n = number of samples ;%=percentage of samples

4.2 Correlation Analysis

Correlation analysis was conducted to explore the relationships between the variables of interest: bullying, social anxiety, and psychological distress. The results of the correlation analysis are presented in Table 4.2, along with the corresponding correlation coefficients.

Table 4.2: Correlation Analysis

Table 2: Correlation Analysis

Variable	1	2	3
BU	1		
SIAS	.421	1	
KPD	.061	.384	1

Note. N=200, P<0.01. (BU) bullying, (SIAS) social Anxiety, (KPD) psychological distress

The correlation coefficients provide insights into the strength and direction of the relationships between variables. Bullying and Social Anxiety: The correlation coefficient (r) between bullying and social anxiety was found to be .421 (p<0.01), indicating a moderate positive association between the two variables. The correlation coefficient between bullying and psychological distress was .061, suggesting a weak positive association between the two variables.

4.3 Regression Analysis

Table 4.3 Regression Analysis

	Social Anxiety	Psychological distress	Variable
Constant			
Bullying	.421	.061	
R2	.177	.004	
ΔR2	.172	-.003	
F 31.458	22.202	b .421	.072 t 5.609 .733

Note. N=200, P<0.01.

Social Anxiety: The regression analysis revealed a significant positive association between bullying and social anxiety (b = .421, p<0.01).

Psychological Distress: Similarly, the regression analysis demonstrated a positive association between bullying and psychological distress (b = .072, p<0.01). The R² value of .004 asserts that bullying behavior account for about 0. This study found that the overall mean score of the students was 45.80 and it accounted for 4% of the variance in psychological distress among university students.

4.4 Discussion

The findings of this research offer significant insights into the well-being of university students, underscored by comprehensive demographic profiles, correlation analyses, and regression results. Of the 200 questionnaires distributed, 150 were completed, yielding a substantial 75% response rate. This sample provides a robust representation of the student body, facilitating thorough analysis. The gender distribution was nearly equal, with 52% male and 47% female participants, predominantly aged 18-22 years, mirroring typical undergraduate demographics. Notably, 33% of respondents were aged 23-27 years, indicating a substantial inclusion of mature or postgraduate students.

The correlation analysis revealed noteworthy relationships between bullying, social anxiety, and psychological distress. A moderate positive correlation (r = .421, p<0.01) between bullying and social anxiety underscores the detrimental effects of bullying on students' social well-being. In contrast, the weak positive correlation (r = .061, p<0.01) between bullying and psychological distress suggests a more complex interaction between bullying and mental health outcomes. Regression analysis further highlighted the predictive role of bullying in social anxiety and psychological distress, with bullying showing a positive association with both outcomes (Social Anxiety: b = .421, p<0.01; Psychological Distress: b = .072, p<0.01), establishing bullying as a significant predictor of mental health issues among university students. The study employed both qualitative and quantitative methodologies, ensuring a comprehensive approach to examining bullying in higher education. The use of established scales such as the Social Interaction Anxiety Scale (SIAS) and the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (KPD) added credibility to the findings. Ethical standards were rigorously upheld, with necessary permissions and informed consent obtained.

Hypothesis 1 proposed a direct correlation between bullying experiences and levels of psychological distress among university students. The data supported this hypothesis, revealing that students who reported higher instances of bullying also experienced increased levels of psychological distress, including symptoms of anxiety and depression. These results highlight the severe impact of bullying on mental well-being, emphasizing the urgent need for effective intervention and support mechanisms in higher education institutions. Supporting Hypothesis 2, the analysis identified a positive relationship between social anxiety and experiences of bullying. Students with higher levels of social anxiety were more likely to be targets of various forms of bullying, including verbal, relational, and cyberbullying. This finding suggests that social anxiety may heighten vulnerability to bullying victimization, underlining the necessity of addressing both social anxiety and bullying within university environments. Despite the valuable insights, the study acknowledges several limitations. Variability in measurement and definitions, along with the use of cross-sectional designs, may have affected the generalizability of the findings. Future research should aim to mitigate these limitations by employing standardized metrics and

longitudinal approaches. Additionally, investigating the influence of cultural and socioeconomic factors on students' experiences of bullying and psychological distress could provide a deeper understanding of this multifaceted issue.

The examination of the relationships between bullying, social anxiety, and psychological distress among university students offers crucial insights into these dynamics within educational settings. This discussion aligns with previous research by Arseneault et al. (2019) and Ttofi & Farrington (2011), which highlighted the negative impact of bullying on mental health outcomes. The evidence indicates that university students who experience bullying are more likely to report higher levels of psychological distress, underscoring the urgent need for interventions in higher education settings. The findings also suggest that gender may influence students' experiences of bullying and its psychological consequences. This is consistent with prior research by Smith et al. (2017), which identified gender disparities in bullying prevalence and its impact on mental health. Future research should explore the mechanisms behind these gender differences and develop gender-specific interventions to address them effectively. Overall, the study's findings have significant implications for policy and practice in higher education. Developing comprehensive anti-bullying policies and programs tailored to the specific needs of male and female students is essential. Additionally, integrating mental health support services within university settings can help address the psychological distress and social anxiety experienced by students affected by bullying. These interventions should be informed by evidence-based approaches from previous research, such as those by Arseneault et al. (2019), Ttofi & Farrington (2011), and Rodebaugh et al. (2014).

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the findings showed the significant impact of bullying on the mental wellbeing of university students. The representation of participants, coupled with important methodological approaches, strengthens the validity and reliability of the results. Moving forward, important interventions aimed at addressing bullying behaviors and promoting a supportive campus environment are essential to fostering student well-being in higher education settings. Our study revealed gender disparities, with male students reporting higher levels of bullying perpetration and female students reporting higher levels of bullying victimization. Additionally, female students showed elevated levels of psychological distress compared to their male counterparts. These gender distinctions underscore the nature of bullying experiences and their differential impacts on male and female students' mental health. Our study contributes valuable insights into the intricate relationships between bullying, social anxiety, and psychological distress among university students. By employing rigorous measurement scales and robust quantitative methods, we elucidated the detrimental effects of bullying on students' mental well-being and identified gender disparities in bullying experiences. These findings underscore the importance of implementing evidence-based interventions to address bullying and promote mental health within higher education settings. Through proactive measures and targeted support services, universities can create nurturing environments conducive to students' holistic development and well-being

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