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PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTRESS, RESILIENCE AND ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT AMONG SCHOOL STUDENTS

Mariam Jabeen^{1*}, Ayesha Ashiq², Bushra Naz³

^{1*}Department of Psychology, Defence Degree College for Women, Lahore

²Government College University, Lahore, Pakistan

³ Department of Psychology, University of Central Punjab, Lahore, Pakistan

Article Info

*Corresponding Author

Email Id: mariam.jabeen007@gmail.com

Abstract

The aim of the current study was to explore the relationship between psychological distress, resilience and academic achievement in higher secondary school students. This cross-sectional research was conducted on the sample of 145 (n=85 girls, n=65 boys). Data was collected using demographics sheet, DASS-21 (Naz & Batool, 2019) and Resilience Scale (Anwar *et al.*, 2017). Findings of the studies reported significant negative relationship of psychological distress with resilience and academic achievement. Significant positive relationship was found between resilience and academic achievement. The results of independent sample t-test indicated the significant gender differences between Psychological distress and resilience, however, results reported no significant difference in academic achievement across gender. Findings of the study will provide an insight about psychological distress, resilience and academic achievement of school students. Moreover, it will also be helpful to develop management plans for students, and update the curriculum to include some activities that can promote the resilience as a skill development. This research will also be helpful for parents to understand the psychological problem and well-being of the children. This research will be helpful in developing policies in educational institutes to manage and provide support to students to improve and enhance their mental well-being. From the findings of the research government can also start initiative for students in the time of pandemic.

Keywords

Psychological distress, resilience, academic achievement, COVID-19



1. Introduction

The outburst of the COVID-19 pandemic brought many profound and marked changes in academic activities that reshaped the education landscape. The challenges faced by higher secondary students impose unprecedented effects on the mental health of students (Ruiz-Hernández *et al.*, 2022). In the 2nd year of the COVID-19 pandemic, the closure of schools and colleges had a great impact on students' resilience regarding their academic achievement and caused psychological distress in students. As students enter the aftermath of the second year of the pandemic, it is imperative to understand the intricate interplay between resilience, academic achievement, and psychological distress among students of secondary and higher secondary levels (Schmits, *et al.*, 2021). According to Arvidsdotter *et al.*, (2016), psychological distress can be defined as a state of emotional suffering related to daily stressors that are difficult for a person to cope with. Psychological distress is termed as non-specific symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress that may impair mental health and affect different psychological disorders (Viertio, 2021). In the stress-distress model, Horwitz (2007) and Ridner (2004) explained that psychological distress occurs when exposure to any stressor intimidates mental and physical health and also creates emotional disturbance as a result of ineffective coping strategies. Students reported psychological distress because of low income resulting in the inability to buy digital gadgets for online learning, restrictions in daily routine, and lack of social contact because of the pandemic. Moreover, lack of exposure to the Learning

Management System (LMS) and connectivity issues exacerbated the psychological distress. Students reported that task overload, change in type of assignments, and lack of physical interaction with teachers heightened the psychological distress. In addition to that dropout rate and school refusal were also seen remarkably in schools (Schmits *et al.*, 2021). Dwiastuti *et al.*, (2022) defined resilience as an important psychological construct that helps the individual to develop and enhance their self-competence to bounce back in difficult situations of life. In one of the research evidence, Kalaitzaki *et al.* (2020) demonstrated that resilience provided support to people against distress and gave psychological support to people on how to cope with their life-threatening challenges. Moreover, most of the researchers suggested that resilience, directly and indirectly, improves the positive growth of those individuals who are faced with many unfavorable problematic situations (Ogińska-Bulik & Zadworna-Cieślak, 2018). In the abundant review of the concept of resilience, Kumpfer (1993) explained the seven important factors of resilience in youngsters such as determination or perseverance, direction or mission, empathy, self-esteem, intellectual competence, optimism, and insight. According to researchers, there are some important coping skills associated with these factors of resilience for promoting the resilience of youngsters in different social interaction situations. These coping skills can be divided into different categories; emotional intelligence skills, interpersonal and intrapersonal social skills, problem-solving skills, decision-making, planning, etc. To face the COVID-19 pandemic, resilience

can help people how to reduce negative psychological issues (Sunet *et al.*, 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic had a potential impact on the student's academic achievement and school closure greatly affected their academic performance (Kuhfeld *et al.*, 2020). Academic achievement is considered a multifaceted construct that contains different aspects of academic learning. According to Steinmayr, *et al.*, (2022), academic achievement serves as the performance outcome that reveals the degree to which a student has achieved certain academic goals in different subjects, particularly at school, college, and university levels. Moreover, Nisar *et al.*, (2017) described the determinants of academic achievement based on the three main factors of learning of secondary school students. These factors are personal (study habits, interests, intelligence, motivation, and aptitude), family factors (socioeconomic status, parents, occupation and education, social class, family income), and institutional factors (student-teacher relationship, academic curriculum, school environment, extracurricular activities). In tandem with the paradigm shift in academics and the confluence of uncertainties and distance learning, gives rise to the psychological distress and effect on resilience. Therefore, understanding the psychological distress, resilience, and academic achievement is essential. Studies reported that psychological distress can be managed to disappear when a person effectively copes with the daily stressors (Horwitz, 2007). The COVID-19 pandemic brings negative outcomes in individuals such as depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, and anxiety (Liu *et al.*, 2020; Xiong *et al.*, 2020). On

the other hand, COVID-19 not only brings psychological distress but may also facilitate the development of resilience in people (Yu & Hu, 2021). Few types of research are available that explain the effect of COVID-19 on psychological distress, resilience, and academic achievement in secondary and higher-secondary students. Suniya *et al.* (2021) examined the effect of COVID-19 and resilience in school children. The results showed that students in high school were less depressed and more resilient as compared to middle school children. Girls showed more symptoms of depression and anxiety as compared to boys. Another important finding revealed that the social and moral support of caregivers and peers provided help in decreasing the intensity of mental health issues in middle and high school children. Fujihara and Tabuchi (2022) explored the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on the psychological distress of youth in Japan. A latent growth curve model was used to assess the changes in the psychological distress of youth and factors that were affecting the change in psychological distress from December 2019 to July 2020. The results indicated that females experienced more psychological distress from December 2019 to July 2020 and then a decrease in intensity in December 2020. There was no gender difference related to changes in psychological distress due to COVID-19. Moreover, health-related status and personality traits factors did not explain the changes in psychological distress in youth during the COVID-19 pandemic. Schmits, *et al.*, (2021) examined the psychological distress in students after one year of COVID-19 in higher education. The finding

indicated that students in higher education were more anxious and depressed especially women and non-binary gender, after one year of the COVID-19 pandemic. They can reduce their psychological distress through social contact with their family and peers and also by doing physical activities in their daily routines. Zhu, *et al.*, (2022) studied the longitudinal changes in the psychological distress of college students by using a wave national panel survey in China. The results showed that 13.5 % of students reported high rates of psychological distress during the first year of COVID-19. Furthermore, results indicated that the academic performance of students was also negatively associated with psychological distress in students. Students who studied in vocational training colleges experienced more psychological distress and showed poorer academic achievement by keeping them away from practical training due to the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. Brites *et al.*, (2023) in their research also reported resilience and emotional regulation as protective factors against psychological distress (Jabeen & Dildar, 2023). Dessy *et al.*, (2021) conducted research that explains the impact of COVID-19 on the resilience of school children N=4006 (5-18 years of age), after the school opening system. The results indicated that the Covid-19 lockdown reduced the probability of students' attendance in boys as compared to girls after the schools reopened. Sun, *et al.*, (2022) investigated the relationship between resilience, psychological distress, and COVID-19 burnout in Chinese college students and also studied the pandemic-related isolation and its psychological effect on students. The results revealed that resilience had a mediating role in

explaining the relationship between psychological distress and COVID-19 burnout. Moreover, pandemic-isolated group students had a higher level of psychological distress and a lower level of resilience than non-isolated group students. Borgonovi and Ferrara (2022) studied the effect of COVID-19 on the student's resilience in their reading and mathematics academic achievement in secondary school children. The results of the longitudinal perspective indicated that COVID-19 had a negative impact on students' academic achievement in reading and mathematics subjects, who belonged to the COVID-19 cohort areas as compared to those who belonged to the non-COVID cohort areas. They were less resilient about how to maintain and upgrade their academic performance during this crisis because lower achievers also faced too many difficulties due to their low socio-economic status than higher achievers. Whitley *et al.*, (2021) researched to see the effect of COVID-19 on the learning and academic achievement of vulnerable children and youth living in Canada. They explained that COVID-19 brought many major changes in the children and youth educational system as they faced physical distancing, school attendance issues, school closure, decline in academic achievement, and disengagement from extra-curricular activities and group studies. Through this research, they suggested guidance about COVID-19 post-pandemic planning for improving the learning and academic achievement of vulnerable children and youth by providing effective inclusive learning, high-speed internet, and financial funds and also coordinated the necessary social services. In the light of literature

review on COVID-19, a lot of students had a greater risk of experiencing psychological distress during the COVID-19 pandemic, high degree of psychological distress also reported students faced tough challenges and were less resilient in improving their academic performance (Schmits, 2021). The studies also demonstrated how lockdowns and other pandemic-related circumstances troubled academic advancement, particularly for vulnerable populations such as students in certain school environments, leading to variations in academic performance, attendance, and distress levels. It can also be concluded from the literature review that psychological distress leads to a lower level of resilience and academic achievement in students. The present research aimed to study the psychological distress, resilience, and academic achievement among secondary-level students after the second year of the COVID-19 pandemic.

1.1 Objectives of the study

- To find out the relationship between psychological distress, resilience, and academic achievement among school students.
- To find out the predictive relationship between psychological distress, resilience, and academic achievement among school students.
- To explore the gender differences concerning psychological distress, resilience, academic achievement, and among school students.

2. Hypotheses

H1. There would be a significant relationship between psychological distress, resilience, and academic achievement of school students.

H2. Psychological distress and resilience will be predictors of academic achievement among school students

H3. There will be gender differences in resilience, academic achievement, and psychological distress among school students.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The cross-sectional correlational research design was used for this research.

3.2 Sample

The sample of the research consisted of 145 students who were studied in 9th, 10th, 11th, and 12th grades. The data was collected online by using Google Forms from different government and private Higher Secondary Schools in Lahore, Pakistan.

3.3 Inclusion Criteria

Data was collected from the different government and private schools of Lahore, Pakistan. Students who were studied in 9th grade, 10th grade, O-level, 11th grade, 12th grade, and A-level were included in the study. Both boys and girls participated in the research. The age range from 14-18 years old was included.

3.4 Exclusion Criteria

Those students who have special needs or have any psychological or physical problems were not included in the study. Same as those who did not give consent were not included in the study.

3.5 Research Instruments

The following research instruments were used in the present study for the data collection.

3.5.1 Demographic Sheet

Self-made demographic used in the research: gender, age, types of school, class, mode of the medium, marks obtained in the previous year, are you satisfied with your marks? Family system, monthly family income, number of siblings, and home environment.

3.5.2 Resilience Scale (Anwar et al., 2017)

The Resilience scale for adolescents is an indigenous scale, used to determine the level of resilience in adolescents. It contained a total of 19 items, rating 1 (completely disagree) to 5 (completely agree) with four important factors named factor1 = emotional regulation (items: 4, 19, 17, 9, 3, 14), factor 2 = adventurousness (items: 13, 18, 16, 10, 6), factor 3 = determination (items: 2, 1, 8, 15) and factor 4 = self-reliance (items: 5, 12, 11, 7). The overall Cronbach's alpha value of the resilience scale was .84 indicating that it was a reliable assessment tool.

3.5.3 Academic Achievement

The academic achievement of the students was determined by their obtained marks in the previous academic year ranging from 1 = below 50%, 2 = below 75%, and 3= 80% and above.

3.5.4 Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scale (DASS-21; Naz & Batool, 2019)

Urdu version of the Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scale (DASS-21) translated by Naz & Batool (2019) was used in the research. The purpose of this scale was to assess depression, anxiety, and stress in adolescents. DASS is a 21-item rating scale ranging from 0 = *did not apply to me at all* to 3 = *applied to me very much or most of the time*. Cronbach's alpha reliability of the scale was $\alpha = .74$ respectively.

3.5.5 Procedure

Permission was taken from the Department of Clinical Psychology, GCU. Data was collected online by using Google Forms. Permission was taken from the parents and heads of the schools. Required scales were used by obtaining permission from the authors. The questionnaires were filled out by both boys' and girls' students who studied in the 9th, 10th, 11th, and 12th grades of different government and private schools and colleges in Lahore, Pakistan.

4. Ethical Considerations

Following ethical considerations were ensured while conducting the research.

- Formal permission was taken from the in charge of the Clinical Psychology Unit and the supervisor of the research. Permission to use scales in the research was also taken from the concerned author.
- Permission for data collection was taken from the institutes and the parents before sending the online forms.
- Informed consent forms were signed by participants by using Google Forms for the online data collection.
- Confidentiality of the data was maintained.

5. Results

The data was evaluated in five key stages. In the first step, descriptive statistics was used for the analysis of participants' demographic characteristics. In 2nd step, Pearson Product moment correlation was calculated to find out the association between psychological distress, resilience, and academic achievement. Moreover, simple linear regression analysis was used to explore the predictors of psychological distress

and resilience. In the third step, an Independent sample t-test was used to find out the gender difference in psychological distress, resilience, and

academic achievement in secondary school students during the 2nd year of COVID-19.

Table 1: Demographics Characteristics of the Study Variables

Variables	f (%)	M(SD)
Age		16.68(1.58)
Gender		
Boys	60(41.4)	
Girls	85(58.6)	
Education		
9 th Grade	23(15.9)	
10 th Grade	19(13.1)	
11 th Grade	58(40.0)	
12 th Grade	45(31.0)	
School type		
Private	47(32.4)	
Government	98(67.6)	

Note; (N=145) M = Mean, SD= Standard Deviation, f = frequency, % = percentage.

The table indicates the descriptive result of the sample. Participant were of the age 13(1.4%), 14(6.2%), 15(11%), 16(28.3%), 17(24.1%), 18(22.8%) and 19(6%). Moreover, 7% were age range of 19-21 years. Boys (41.6%) and girls

(58.4%) respectively. Education is divided into four categories 9th, 10th, 11th, and 12th. 15.9% of the students were from 9th grade, and 13.1 % were from 10th grade. 40% of the students were from 11th grade and 31% from 12th grade.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics and Psychometric Properties of Assessment Measures

Measures	M	SD	Ranges	Cronbach's α
DASS	38.22	10.48	20-69	.92
Resilience Scale	70.58	14.83	25-95	.91

Note: (N=145) M=Mean, SD= Standard Deviation, DASS= Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scale

Table 2 shows the results of the reliability analysis for the assessment measures used in the research. The Cronbach alpha reliability of the resilience scale was found α=.91 and α=.92 for DASS.

Table 3: Correlation, Mean, and SD of Resilience, DASS, and Academic Achievement

Variable	K	M	SD	1	2	3
1. Psychological Distress	21	38.22	10.48		-.59**	-.52**
2. Resilience	19	70.58	14.83	-	-	.45**
3. Academic Achievement		1.31	.46			-

Note: (N=145) M=Mean , SD= Standard Deviation

Descriptive analysis showed mean and standard deviation for psychological distress (Mean=38.22, standard deviation=10.48), resilience (Mean=70.58, standard deviation=14.83), and academic achievement (Mean=1.31, standard deviation=.46) Pearson product-moment analysis

was used which indicates that psychological distress had significant negative relationship with resilience $r = -.59$ and academic achievement $r = -.52$. Resilience had significant positive relationship with academic achievement $r = .45$.

Table 4: Regression Analysis for Academic Achievement

Variable	Model 1		
	B	β	SE
Constant	1.10**		.30
Psychological Distress	-.01**	.40	.00
Resilience	.00**	.21	.00
R ²	.30		
ΔR^2	.29		

Note: N=145, B= Beta, β =Standardized beta value, SE= Standard error, R²= R square, ΔR^2 = Adjusted R Square, $p > .01$

Simple linear regression was used to assess the predictive level of academic achievement. Preliminary analysis was carried out to confirm no interruption of the assumption of the regression analysis. In the first modal statistically significant

beta values for resilience $b = -.21$, $p < .001$, and psychological distress, $b = .40$, $p < .001$ were found. The R squared change in the second modal was $R = .29$, F change (2,141) = 31.39 $p < .001$.

Table 5: Comparison of Resilience, DASS, and Academic Achievement Scores between Females and Males

Variables	Female		Male		t(145)	p	Cohen's d
	M	SD	M	SD			
Psychological	36.75	9.59	40.30	11.30	2.02	.04	.33

distress							
Resilience	72.91	13.39	67.28	16.21	-2.28	.02	.03
Academic	1.25	.44	1.38	.49	1.59	.11	.27
Achievement							

Note: M= Mean, SD= Standard Deviation, DASS= Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scale, $p > .01$

Results indicate that there is a significant gender difference between psychological distress and resilience that indicates a higher level of psychological distress in females with $M=36.75$ and standard deviation $SD= 9.45$ and a higher level of resilience in females ($M= 72.91$ and $SD=13.39$). Moreover, the results of the independent sample t-test also indicate no significant difference in the academic achievement score.

6. Discussion

The current study aimed to explore the relationship between psychological distress, resilience, and academic achievement among students at the higher secondary level. The findings of the current research are supported by the previous studies. According to the 1st hypothesis of the research, there would be a relationship between psychological distress, resilience, and academic achievement of secondary school students. The findings of the current research revealed a significant negative relationship between psychological distress with resilience and academic achievement. The findings were supported by previous research by Bacchi and Licinio (2017) that was related to the resilience and distress of the students. The findings of the research indicate a negative relationship between psychological distress and

resilience with academic achievement which explains that a high level of psychological distress is related to a low level of academic achievement. The results of the correlation analysis indicate a significant positive relationship between resilience and academic achievement. The findings of the current research are in line with the research that was conducted by Cassidy (2016) on academic resilience and academic achievement. The results of the study indicate a significant relationship between resilience and academic achievement of Adolescents. According to Garcia-Martinez et al., (2022), students with high levels of resilience can manage difficult situations and have better self-concept and achievement in academics. The findings of the research also indicate the significant mediation relationship between self-concept, academic achievement, and resilience in the students. Hatun & Kurtça (2023) in their research on fear of COVID-19, psychological distress, and resilience also reported a significant positive correlation between psychological distress and resilience in students. According to the 2nd hypothesis, there will be a predictive relationship between psychological distress, resilience, and academic achievement of the students. The findings of the current study also indicate a significant predictive relationship between psychological distress and the resilience of the

students. The results of the study stated that resilience is a significant predictor of academic achievement. A study was conducted by Nota *et al.* (2004) on self-regulation, academic achievement, and resilience. The results of the study indicate a significant relationship between resilience and achievement and also state that resilience is a significant predictor of academic achievement. Rothon *et al.*, (2009) in research was conducted on the impact of psychological distress on the academic achievement of the students. The results of the study indicate a negative relationship between psychological distress and resilience of the Adolescents. The third hypothesis was, that there might be gender differences in psychological distress, resilience, and academic achievement of the school students. The findings of the research indicated gender differences in psychological distress and resilience of the students. These findings are in line with the research conducted by Matud *et al.*, (2015) on Spain students to explore the gender differences in psychological distress among the students. The results of the study indicate significant gender differences between resilience and psychological distress of the students, which means there is a difference in handling psychological distress in male and female students. In research Jeamjitvibool *et al.*, (2022) and Sardella *et al.*, (2022) also found a significant relationship between resilience and psychological distress, Furthermore, the research also indicated a significant difference in resilience of males and females that indicates that women are more vulnerable to psychological distress as compared to the men. In conclusion, among secondary students in the second year of COVID-19, the

study examined psychological distress, resilience, and academic achievement. Psychological distress and academic achievement were found to be significantly negatively correlated indicating that a higher level of psychological distress leads to low academic achievement. On the other hand, resilience and academic achievement were positively correlated. Academic achievement is predicted by resilience. Both psychological distress and resilience showed clear gender differences, these findings highlight gender-specific vulnerabilities and the influence of psychological distress and resilience on academic achievement. The small sample size was the limitation of the study as the study was done during the pandemic. It is recommended that future researchers research a larger sample. Furthermore, the absence of an IQ measurement in the study was also a limitation, and acknowledged, it is recommended that future researchers integrate this as well in the studies.

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