

Between Hearts, Minds, and Grades: A Study On The Link Between Interpersonal Relationships, Mental Health, and Academic Outcomes

(Antara hati, pikiran, dan nilai: Sebuah studi tentang hubungan antara relasi Interpersonal, kesehatan mental, dan hasil akademik)

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Abstract: This study aims to examine the relationship between mental health, the quality of personal relationships, and academic performance among university students, focusing on how interpersonal relationships and academic achievement influence psychological well-being within collectivistic cultural contexts such as Indonesia and Pakistan. Participants were university students from various faculties in both countries, selected through convenience sampling, who completed a Google Form containing the *Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scale (DASS-21)*, the *Experiences in Close Relationships–Relationship Structures (ECR-RS)*, and self-reported academic grades. Data were analyzed using Pearson correlations and multiple regression. Moreover, 49.2% of students reported that romantic relationships were the most influential in their emotional lives, and 80.8% stated they could not discuss their romantic problems with their parents. The findings indicate that lower relationship quality and poor emotional regulation are associated with higher levels of depression, anxiety, and stress. Additionally, increased stress levels contribute to lower academic performance, creating a cycle of emotional strain and declining academic achievement. These results highlight the importance of emotional support and healthy emotion-regulation strategies to help students manage psychological pressure effectively.

Keywords: mental health; academic performance; university students; emotion regulation; interpersonal relationships

Abstrak: Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji hubungan antara kesehatan mental, kualitas hubungan pribadi, dan prestasi akademik pada mahasiswa universitas dengan fokus pada bagaimana hubungan interpersonal dan pencapaian akademik memengaruhi kesejahteraan psikologis mahasiswa dalam konteks budaya kolektivistik seperti Indonesia dan Pakistan. Partisipan penelitian ini adalah mahasiswa dari berbagai fakultas di kedua negara yang dipilih menggunakan teknik convenience sampling, dan mengisi Google Form berisi *Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scale (DASS-21)*, *Experiences in Close Relationships–Relationship Structures (ECR-RS)*, serta nilai akademik yang dilaporkan sendiri. Data dianalisis menggunakan korelasi Pearson dan regresi berganda. Selain itu, 49,2% mahasiswa melaporkan bahwa hubungan romantis merupakan faktor yang paling berpengaruh dalam kehidupan emosional mereka, dan 80,8% menyatakan bahwa mereka tidak dapat membicarakan masalah romantis mereka dengan orang tua. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa rendahnya kualitas hubungan dan regulasi emosi yang buruk berkaitan dengan tingginya tingkat depresi, kecemasan, dan stres. Selain itu, meningkatnya tingkat stres berkontribusi pada penurunan performa akademik, menciptakan siklus tekanan emosional dan pencapaian akademik yang menurun. Temuan ini menegaskan pentingnya dukungan emosional dan strategi regulasi emosi yang sehat untuk membantu mahasiswa mengelola tekanan psikologis secara efektif.

Kata Kunci: kesehatan mental; kinerja akademik; mahasiswa; regulasi emosi; hubungan interpersona

INTRODUCTION

University students across the world are increasingly facing complex emotional, relational, and academic pressures, and this problem has become especially pronounced in developing countries such as Pakistan and Indonesia. Recent studies have shown rising levels of depression, anxiety, and stress among university populations, driven by academic overload, family expectations, and unstable interpersonal relationships (Sohail, 2020; Pramukti et al., 2020; Aftab et al., 2021). Emotional distress has been closely associated with reduced academic functioning, and recent research highlights that coping strategies serve as an important mediator in the relationship between psychological distress and academic outcomes (Almarzouki, 2024). These findings demonstrate that mental health is shaped not only by individual factors but also by the relational and academic environments within which students operate.

From a theoretical perspective, relationship quality plays a significant role in emotional well-being. Attachment Theory proposes that individuals with insecure attachment patterns, characterized by high relational anxiety and avoidance, are more susceptible to stress, depression, and anxiety (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2019). Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory further emphasizes that development is profoundly influenced by one's immediate relational context, including interactions with family, peers, and romantic partners (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006).

Empirical studies support these frameworks, showing that insecure relationship patterns contribute to depressive symptoms, emotional dysregulation, and heightened perceived stress among young adults (Moreira et al., 2019; Marques et al., 2021; Li et al., 2024). The ECR-RS instrument used in the present study is grounded in these theoretical assumptions, assessing attachment orientations across multiple relational domains (Fraley et al., 2011).

Despite strong theoretical foundations, research that examines how relationship quality, emotional well-being, and academic functioning interact within South Asian and Southeast Asian settings remains limited. Cultural norms in these regions, such as collectivism, strong parental involvement, and expectations to maintain relational harmony, may shape psychological experiences differently compared to Western populations (Arnett, 2018). For instance, cultural expectations and romantic relationships have been shown to significantly influence emotional well-being among Pakistani youth (Arif Nadeem et al., 2022). Additionally, parental influence in collectivist cultures continues to affect major life decisions and psychological adjustment among young adults in both Pakistan and Indonesia (Cheema & Malik, 2021; Putri & Sari, 2021). These cultural dynamics highlight the need for research that accounts for local relational expectations, family norms, and social pressures.

From a practical standpoint, the urgency of this research is reinforced by the rise in mental health challenges following the COVID-19 pandemic. Students in both countries have reported heightened academic pressure, financial stress, strained interpersonal relationships, and uncertainty about the future, all of which contribute significantly to psychological distress (Chan et al., 2021; Son et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2020; Meiliyana et al., 2022; Irawati et al., 2022). Family conflict is also a major factor influencing emotional functioning, with studies showing that high levels of family tension impair emotional regulation and negatively affect academic performance (Córdova et al., 2023). University mental health services often do not adequately address relational quality and cultural expectations, creating a disconnect between the challenges students face and the institutional support available to them.

Interpersonal relationships play a central role in shaping emotional functioning. Supportive and secure relationships promote resilience, emotional regulation, and psychological well-being (Moreira et al., 2019; Li et al., 2024). In contrast, insecure relational patterns are associated with increased levels of stress, anxiety, depressive symptoms, and interpersonal conflict (Marques et al., 2021; Güngör et al., 2022). The Experiences in Close Relationships–Relationship Structures (ECR-RS) scale is widely used to assess relationship security and insecurity across multiple relational contexts, making it suitable for

exploring relationship dynamics among university students in diverse cultural settings.

Mental health among university students is commonly assessed using the Depression Anxiety Stress Scales (DASS-21), originally developed by Lovibond and Lovibond (1995) and available in validated Indonesian versions. The DASS-21 is widely used in Asian higher education research due to its strong psychometric properties. Studies across Asia have shown that elevated DASS-21 scores are associated with academic difficulties, interpersonal strain, digital learning fatigue, and limited social support (Ramli et al., 2022; Rahmadiana et al., 2021; Chan et al., 2021). In collectivist cultures, psychological distress may be further intensified by concerns about disappointing parents or failing to meet societal expectations (Aslam & Qureshi, 2021).

Academic performance is both an educational indicator and a reflection of students' emotional well-being. Lower academic achievement has been associated with reduced motivation, increased stress, and poorer emotional health (Pascoe et al., 2020; Alqurashi, 2022; Yusuf & Fakhrudin, 2023). Emotional distress often disrupts cognitive functioning, concentration, and motivation, underscoring the importance of studying academic outcomes in connection with relational and mental health factors (Almarzouki, 2024). In Pakistan and Indonesia, academic success is closely tied to family honor, socioeconomic opportunity, and personal identity, making academic pressure a major influence on students' mental health (Cheema & Malik, 2021).

The variables selected for the present study are grounded in both theoretical relevance and practical significance. Relationship quality is central to understanding emotional functioning within collectivist cultures. Mental health, measured through the DASS-21, represents the most common forms of psychological distress experienced by students. Academic performance reflects both educational outcomes and the psychological pressures associated with academic expectations. Although international literature has addressed each of these variables separately, limited research has explored their interconnectedness within the specific cultural contexts of Pakistan and Indonesia. This gap in research examining how family and romantic relationships jointly influence students' emotional well-being and academic success in collectivist and religious contexts (Vicary et al., 2024). Therefore, the present study aims to examine how relationship quality, mental health, and academic performance are related among university students in these two understudied yet culturally rich populations.

Pakistan and Indonesia were selected because both are collectivist societies where family expectations, interpersonal relationships, and academic pressure strongly influence student well-being. At the same time, they differ in important ways: Indonesia is culturally diverse with a broad emphasis on social harmony, whereas Pakistan's collectivism is more strongly shaped by extended family structures and traditional norms. These similarities and differences make the two countries suitable for examining how

collectivist values operate across distinct cultural and religious settings. Other collectivist countries were not included because they already have extensive research in this area, while Pakistan and Indonesia remain underrepresented despite rising mental-health challenges among university students.

METHOD

Research Participants. The study included 120 university students, comprising young adults from various departments and academic years. We used a random sampling method to select participants from different classes across multiple faculties and universities, ensuring a rich diversity in their academic backgrounds and life experiences. Participation was completely voluntary, and we ensured that we obtained informed consent from everyone before data collection began. To be included, participants had to be currently enrolled university students aged between 18 and 25, and they were required to understand and complete the questionnaire on their own. We emphasized the importance of students' willingness to participate, as it was crucial for ethical reasons, ensuring that we only gathered data from those who consented.

Research Design. This study used a non-experimental, cross-sectional correlational design to investigate the connections among personal relationships (primarily romantic and familial), mental health, and academic performance among university students. We chose this design because it allows us to explore how these variables relate to one another without manipulating or controlling any

conditions, giving us a clearer picture of the naturally occurring relationships within this group.

Research Instruments

Three main instruments were used in this study:

1. Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scale (DASS-21)

Mental health was measured using the 21-item DASS-21 developed by Lovibond and Lovibond (1995). The instrument assesses three dimensions of psychological distress—depression, anxiety, and stress—each represented by seven items. Responses are recorded on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (did not apply to me at all) to 3 (applied to me very much or most of the time). Higher scores indicate greater levels of psychological distress.

Operational Definition: Mental health in this study refers to the level of psychological well-being or distress, operationalized through participants' total and subscale scores on the DASS-21.

2. Experiences in Close Relationships—Relationship Structures Questionnaire (ECR-RS)

Personal and relational functioning was assessed using the ECR-RS, a 9-item scale developed by Fraley, Heffernan, Vicary, and Brumbaugh (2011). The instrument measures attachment-related anxiety and avoidance across key relational domains, including romantic partners, mothers, fathers, and close friends. Each relationship domain is rated using the same nine items on a 7-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Higher scores represent higher attachment anxiety or avoidance.

Operational Definition: Personal relationships in this study refer to the quality of an individual's connections with romantic partners, family members, and close friends, operationalized through attachment anxiety and avoidance scores on the ECR-RS.

3. Academic Performance

Academic achievement was assessed using students' self-reported Grade Point Average (GPA) or their most recent academic grades. These scores provide an indicator of students' academic standing within their respective programs.

Operational Definition: Academic performance refers to the degree of academic success, operationalized through participants' self-reported GPA or most recent grades.

Research Procedure. The research was conducted over a period of approximately two weeks. During the initial phase, the research instruments, DASS-21 (Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scale) and ECR-RS (Experiences in Close Relationships—Relationship Structures Questionnaire) were reviewed and finalized based on their standard English versions to ensure clarity and relevance for university students. The instruments were not translated into Bahasa Indonesia or Urdu because the survey was administered through Google Forms, which provides an automatic language-translation feature based on each participant's device settings. This ensured that respondents could view and understand the items in the language they were most comfortable with, without altering the original meaning or structure of the standardized instruments.

After the instruments were finalized, an online Google Form was created containing a brief introduction, informed consent statement and the three main parts of the study: (1) DASS-21 items, (2) ECR-RS items related to romantic and family relationships, and (3) a self-report question asking participants to indicate their most recent academic grades. It also contains 2 more self-report questions (1) which relation influence you the most? and (2) Do you think you can share your romantic life with you parents? The Google Form link was distributed to students from different departments and academic years through random selection. Data were collected from university students in **Yogyakarta, Indonesia, and Lahore, Pakistan**. Yogyakarta is one of Indonesia's major educational centers, known for its diverse student population and concentration of public and private universities. Lahore similarly serves as a major academic hub in Pakistan, attracting students from different regions and representing a wide range of cultural and family backgrounds. These two cities were selected because they offer accessible university populations and reflect the relational, cultural, and academic dynamics typical of collectivist societies in their respective countries. Participation was voluntary and anonymous.

A total of 120 valid responses were collected from university students within 10–12 days. Each participant's willingness to participate constituted consent for participation.

Data Analysis. We analyzed the data using Pearson's correlation to assess the strength and direction of the relationships among the

variables, along with multiple regression analysis to pinpoint how the quality of personal relationships and academic performance might affect mental health outcomes.

The collected data were exported from Google Forms into Google Sheets for organization and statistical analysis. Scores for DASS-21 were computed according to the official scoring procedure by summing all 21 item responses to obtain a total DASS score representing overall psychological distress. Similarly, the ECR-RS included separate scores for avoidance and anxiety dimensions. The average of these two dimensions was computed to form a single total score representing overall relationship insecurity. Academic grades were simplified into numerical values (percentage or GPA) to make them comparable across participants.

For the statistical analysis, two methods were used:

1. Pearson's correlation coefficient (r) was applied to determine the strength and direction of the relationship among mental health (DASS-21 total), relationship insecurity (ECR-RS total) and academic grades.
2. Multiple regression analysis was conducted using the LINEST function in Google Sheets to examine how relationship insecurity and academic performance predicted levels of psychological distress.

The R^2 value from the regression analysis indicated the proportion of variance in DASS-21 scores explained by ECR-RS and academic

grades. All results were interpreted according to standard psychological research and APA 7th edition reporting guidelines.

RESULTS

This research explored how mental health, relationship quality, and academic performance are connected among university students. The total distress score from the DASS-21 represented mental health, while ECR-RS scores reflected the quality of personal relationships, and academic grades indicated performance. Both Pearson's correlation and multiple regression analyses were used to examine the strength and direction of these relationships.

Correlation Analysis

Table 1 presents the results of the correlation analysis. A significant positive relationship was found between ECR-RS total scores and total distress scores ($r = .588, p < .001$). This means that students who reported more insecure or conflictual relationships also tended to show higher levels of depression, anxiety, and stress. Grades were negatively related to both ECR-RS ($r = -.376, p < .001$) and total distress scores ($r = -.407, p < .001$). In other words, students with better academic results generally experienced lower emotional distress and had healthier relationship patterns.

Table 1. Correlation Analysis among ECR-RS Total, Grades and Total Distress Score

Variables	ECR-RS Total	Grades	Total DASS
ECR-RS Total	—	-0.376	0.588
Grades	-0.376	—	-0.407
Total DASS	0.588	-0.407	—

Note. All correlations are significant at $p < .001$ (two-tailed). These findings suggest that students with stronger attachment insecurity experience more emotional problems, while high academic achievers are less likely to show signs of psychological distress.

Multiple Regression Analysis

A multiple regression analysis was conducted to determine whether relationship quality and academic grades together could predict students' levels of psychological distress. The model was statistically significant, $F(2,117) = 36.9, p < .001$, with an R^2 value of .387. This indicates that around 38.7% of the variation in distress levels could be explained by these two factors.

Table 2. Multiple Regression Analysis Predicting Total Distress Score from ECR-RS Total and Grades

Predictor	B	SE	β	t	p	95% CI (lower-upper)
Intercept	17.52	4.745	—	3.69	<.001	—
ECR-RS	5.71	0.880	0.507	6.49	<.001	0.352–0.662

Grades	-2.53	0.913	-0.217	-2.77	0.006	-0.371
						0.062

Note. $R = .622$, $R^2 = .387$, Adjusted $R^2 = .376$, $F(2,117) = 36.9$, $p < .001$.

In this table, R represents the combined strength of the relationship between the predictors (ECR-RS and grades) and the outcome variable (total distress score). The R^2 value shows that 38.7% of changes in mental health scores were explained by relationship quality and academic performance. The Adjusted R^2 value (.376) shows the reliability of this model after accounting for sample size and number of predictors. The F -statistic (36.9) and p -value ($< .001$) confirm that the overall model was significant, meaning the results are unlikely to be due to chance.

Both predictors made unique contributions to the model. The positive coefficient for ECR-RS ($B = 5.71$, $p < .001$) shows that greater relationship insecurity predicts higher distress levels. Conversely, the negative coefficient for grades ($B = -2.53$, $p = .006$) indicates that higher academic achievement predicts lower distress. Together, these variables explain a considerable portion of students' emotional well-being, showing that both relational experiences and academic success are strongly tied to mental health among university students.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study highlight the significant influence of personal relationships and academic performance on university students' mental health. The results demonstrated that higher relationship

insecurity, as measured by higher ECR-RS scores, was positively associated with increased levels of depression, anxiety, and stress, while higher academic grades were negatively associated with psychological distress. These two factors explained 39% of the variance in DASS scores, confirming that both relational and academic domains play a critical role in shaping students' emotional well-being.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study revealed significant relationships among mental health, personal relationship insecurity, and academic performance among university students. The results showed that students with higher relationship insecurity, reflected by higher scores on the Experiences in Close Relationships–Relationship Structures (ECR-RS), tended to have higher scores on the Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scale (DASS-21), indicating greater emotional distress. Conversely, students with higher academic grades reported lower levels of depression, anxiety, and stress. These findings suggest that both interpersonal relationships and academic achievement play crucial roles in students' overall psychological well-being.

These results support Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, which emphasizes that an individual's psychological functioning is shaped by the quality of interactions within their microsystems, such as family and peer relationships. They also align with Attachment Theory, which posits that secure relationships promote emotional stability and adaptive coping, whereas insecure or neglectful

attachments heighten vulnerability to mental health problems.

In collectivist and religious cultures such as Indonesia and Pakistan, where family and social expectations are deeply intertwined with individual identity, the emotional consequences of relational stress may be particularly intense. The findings suggest that when relationship difficulties coincide with academic challenges, students may experience amplified emotional distress, potentially hindering both their mental health and academic success.

Therefore, universities in such cultural contexts should consider implementing psychoeducational and family-inclusive programs that foster healthy communication, emotional awareness, and coping skills. Providing opportunities for open dialogue about emotional and relational issues can strengthen students' resilience, promote mental health, and enhance academic engagement.

In conclusion, this study underscores the interconnectedness of emotional, relational, and academic domains in students' lives. By addressing these areas holistically, educational institutions can play a vital role in supporting students' psychological well-being and long-term academic growth.

To gain deeper insight into the relational influences, one of the survey questions asked students what type of relationship most strongly affects them emotionally. The responses indicated that 49.2% of students identified romantic relationships as the most influential, 37.5% identified family relationships, and 13.3%

mentioned friendships. Another question explored whether students could share their romantic lives or related problems with their parents. A striking 80.8% of students responded "No," indicating a major communication gap between parents and students regarding emotional and relational matters. This finding reinforces the importance of addressing emotional openness and parent-child communication within collectivist cultures such as Pakistan and Indonesia.

University life exposes students to a variety of new emotional experiences, many of which can be confusing or overwhelming. During this period, students begin to explore identity, independence, and emotional attachment. However, in collectivist societies, open discussion of feelings with parents is often discouraged due to cultural norms emphasizing respect, restraint, and privacy. As a result, many students face emotional struggles in silence. They may turn to peers or romantic partners for understanding, and, unfortunately, some individuals may take advantage of their emotional vulnerability.

It is important to recognize that these emotional experiences are a normal part of youth development, and parents can play a vital role in guiding their children through them. When parents support their children in managing emotions, they help prevent the misuse of emotional energy in harmful directions. Learning emotional regulation and channeling feelings positively can reduce the risk of mental health issues. In contrast, when students fail to manage emotions effectively, they may develop negative self-thoughts such

as “something is wrong with me,” “I’m not good enough,” or “I don’t deserve love.” These patterns can lower self-esteem and interfere with goal setting and identity formation, key tasks of emerging adulthood.

Therefore, it is essential for universities to not only focus on academics but also to promote emotional literacy and relational education. Regular workshops could be organized where students and parents participate to discuss emotional challenges, communication barriers, and cultural expectations. These programs should include training on emotional regulation for students, awareness sessions for parents about their children’s developmental needs, and interactive discussions on building trust and communication. Such initiatives can help bridge the emotional gap and foster a more supportive environment for young adults.

From a theoretical perspective, these findings align with Attachment Theory, emphasizing how insecure attachments and poor communication can increase vulnerability to emotional distress. The negative correlation between grades and DASS scores further suggests that students who perform well academically are likely to possess better self-regulation and emotional balance. Meanwhile, those with insecure relationships or unaddressed emotional struggles may experience higher stress levels, affecting both their mental health and academic focus.

Although this study provides meaningful insights, it also has limitations. The data were collected through self-report questionnaires from university students in

Pakistan and Indonesia, which may limit generalizability. Additionally, emotional and relational experiences are complex and may not be fully captured by quantitative tools. Future research could incorporate qualitative interviews or focus groups to explore the personal and cultural meanings behind students’ emotional experiences in greater depth.

In conclusion, the results underscore the critical connection among emotional well-being, relationship insecurity, and academic performance. Addressing emotional communication within families, integrating emotional regulation training in universities, and fostering understanding between students and parents can significantly reduce emotional distress. Creating such supportive systems will help students manage their feelings in healthier ways and enhance both their personal growth and academic success.

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