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## Psychological Distress, Hopelessness and Quality of Life among Low Achievers

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### ABSTRACT

This study examine the psychological distress, Hopelessness, and Quality of Life among low-achieving university students. A sample of N=260 students (126 males and 134 females), aged 15 to 30, was selected using a convenience sampling technique. Data were collected using the Depression Anxiety Stress Scale (DASS-21), Beck's Hopelessness Scale (BHS), and the WHO Quality of Life-BREF questionnaire. Correlation analysis revealed that Quality of Life has a significant positive relationship with Stress and Anxiety ( $r=.38$ ,  $p<.01$ ), while a significant negative correlation was found between Hopelessness and Quality of Life ( $r=-.24$ ,  $p<.01$ ), indicating that increased pessimism significantly decreases life satisfaction. Regression analysis further confirmed that psychological distress factors explain approximately 18.4% of the variance in students' Quality of Life ( $R^2=.184$ ,  $p<.001$ ). Furthermore, independent sample t-tests revealed significant gender differences in Hopelessness ( $t=2.34$ ,  $p=.020$ ), with males demonstrating higher levels ( $M=5.46$ ) compared to females ( $M=4.91$ ). These findings highlight the critical impact of academic-related distress on subjective well-being and advocate for holistic support systems to foster resilience among students with lower academic rankings.

### INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary global academic landscape, the pressure to achieve high grades has become a defining characteristic of the student experience. However, this intense focus on academic excellence often overshadows the psychological well-being of the student population. This research specifically focuses on a particularly vulnerable group: students categorized as “defaulters” or low achievers. In many educational systems, these individuals are frequently marginalized, leading to a complex interplay of negative psychological states that extend far beyond the classroom. While academic success is widely celebrated, the mental health of lower-ranking students is often neglected, creating a destructive cycle where emotional distress further hinders intellectual performance. This study aims to explore the



multifaceted relationship between Stress, Anxiety, and Hopelessness, and how these factors collectively diminish the Quality of Life for these students.

The Burden of Chronic Stress and Cognitive Impairment Stress is fundamentally an internal state of emotional strain and psychological pressure that arises when an individual perceives a significant gap between environmental demands and their personal resources. For low achievers, academic life is a constant source of such pressure. In this context, stress is rarely a one-time event; instead, it manifests as chronic stress. Unlike acute stress, which can occasionally provide a temporary boost in motivation (eustress), chronic stress persists for weeks or months, leading to profound psychological pain and exhaustion. This constant state of high alert triggers physiological changes, such as the prolonged release of cortisol, which can result in long-term health complications. From an academic perspective, chronic stress is particularly damaging because it impairs the brain's executive functions, specifically the working memory. Working memory is essential for processing new information, solving problems, and following complex instructions. When a student's cognitive capacity is consumed by the constant worry of failure or the stigma of being a "defaulter," their ability to retain new lessons is significantly reduced. This creates a functional barrier to academic recovery, where the student's stress literally prevents them from learning the material required to improve their rank.

Anxiety and the Cycle of Behavioral Inhibition Closely linked to stress is Anxiety, a multifaceted psychological state characterized by persistent nervousness, fear, and hesitation. For students with lower academic standing, anxiety often manifests as "evaluative anxiety"—a pervasive fear of social judgment and further failure. This condition does not only influence a person's internal thought patterns; it dictates their outward behavior and physical health, often causing symptoms such as restlessness, fatigue, and difficulty concentrating. Within the university setting, anxiety acts as a powerful behavioral inhibitor. It prevents students from participating in class discussions, seeking necessary help from instructors, or engaging in peer study groups for fear of being exposed as "inadequate." This withdrawal further alienates the student from the very resources they need to improve their academic standing. Consequently, the anxiety regarding their performance becomes the primary obstacle to improving that performance, reinforcing their status as a low achiever through a process of social and academic isolation.

Hopelessness and the Loss of Future Orientation One of the most debilitating psychological factors examined in this research is Hopelessness. Hopelessness is defined as the profound emotional conviction that current negative circumstances will never improve and that future goals or happiness are unattainable. For a student consistently receiving low marks or facing academic probation, hopelessness can lead to a state of "learned helplessness." This occurs when the individual stops making any effort because they no longer perceive a link between their hard work and a positive outcome.

This loss of future orientation is a critical predictor of severe depression and academic disengagement. When a student loses hope, they lose the primary driver for persistence and resilience. In a competitive academic environment, where success is often equated with self-worth, the feeling of being trapped in a cycle of failure makes the label of "defaulter" a self-fulfilling prophecy. The student ceases to see themselves as a person with potential, seeing themselves instead only through the lens of their academic rank. Impact on Holistic Quality of Life Ultimately, the culmination of chronic stress, persistent anxiety, and profound hopelessness results in a significantly diminished Quality of Life. Quality of Life is a broad, multidimensional construct that reflects an individual's subjective satisfaction with their existence across physical, emotional, and social domains. For the low-achieving student, their identity often becomes so tied to their academic performance that their overall satisfaction with life plummets.

Their social relationships may suffer as they withdraw from peers who are succeeding, and their physical health may decline due to the toll of chronic emotional strain. Furthermore, the psychological burden of low achievement can lead to a lack of interest in hobbies, community involvement, and future career planning. By investigating these variables, this study highlights that the challenges faced by low-ranking students are not merely academic in nature; they are deeply rooted in a psychological struggle that requires

holistic intervention, emotional support, and a shift in how educational success is defined. Understanding these dynamics is essential for creating a supportive educational environment that fosters resilience and improves the quality of life for all students, regardless of their position on a grading scale.

## RATIONALE

In the current educational framework, most academic and psychological attention is directed toward high-achieving students, while those categorized as “lower rank” or low achievers are frequently marginalized or overlooked. This research is fundamentally necessitated by the urgent need to understand how academic underperformance and the stigma of being a “defaulter” impact a student’s mental health and overall development. The significance of the current study lies in its focus on identifying the specific psychological constructs—namely Stress, Anxiety, and Hopelessness—that act as primary barriers to the Quality of Life for low-ranking students. The rationale for this study is grounded in the perspective that academic pressure is not merely a matter of grades; it deeply permeates a student’s self-perception, emotional stability, and future expectations. The interplay between persistent stress and debilitating anxiety often creates a cycle of hopelessness that significantly impairs a student's cognitive functions, such as working memory, further hindering their ability to improve. By investigating these relationships, this research provides vital insights for educators, parents, and mental health professionals, highlighting that educational institutions must evolve beyond focusing solely on academic output and begin implementing holistic support systems that address the internal psychological struggles of students. Furthermore, this study establishes a scientific foundation within the socio-cultural context of Pakistan to understand the profound connection between academic standing and the subjective Quality of Life of university students, ultimately advocating for a more empathetic and supportive educational environment.

## Objectives

1. To investigate the relationship among psychological distress, Hopelessness, and Quality of Life.
2. To examine the predictive role of psychological distress, and Hopelessness on Quality of Life.
3. To examine the group differences on study variables.

## Hypotheses

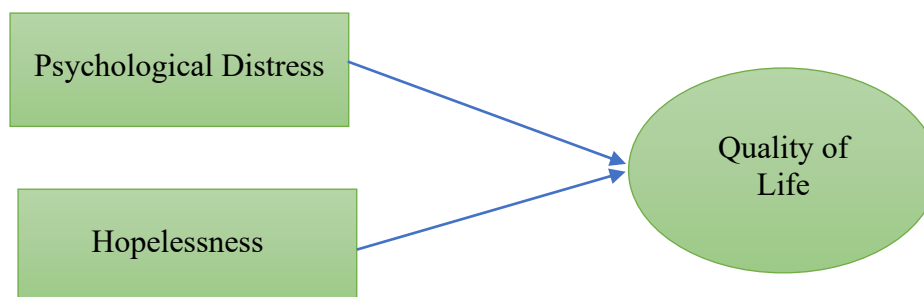
**H1:** There is a significant relationship between psychological distress, Hopelessness, and Quality of Life among low achievers.

**H2:** Psychological distress and Hopelessness significantly predict Quality of Life among low achievers.

**H3:** There is significant gender differences on psychological distress, hopelessness and quality of life among low achievers.

## Conceptualized Model

Figure 1: The conceptual model illustrates the impact of Stress, Anxiety, and Hopelessness (Independent Variables) on the Quality of Life (Dependent Variable) among low achievers.



**Note:** The model illustrates the impact of psychological distress and Hopelessness on Quality of Life of students with low academic ranking.

## METHODS

### Sample

A total of N=260 university students were recruited for the present study using a convenience sampling technique. The participants were students of Government College University Faisalabad (GCUF), representing a diverse academic background of "lower rank" or low achievers. The sample consisted of 126 male students (48.5%) and 134 female students (51.5%). The ages of the participants ranged from 15 to 30 years, covering the developmental stage of late adolescence to emerging adulthood. All participants were briefed about the research objectives, and informed consent was obtained prior to data collection to ensure ethical compliance and confidentiality.

### Instruments

#### **Depression Anxiety Stress Scale (Lovibond and Lovibond,1995)**

The Depression Anxiety Stress Scale (DASS-21), developed by Lovibond and Lovibond (1995), was utilized to measure the emotional states of the participants. This is a 21-item self-report scale designed to assess three related negative emotional states: depression, anxiety, and stress. Each subscale contains 7 items, scored on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 0 ("did not apply to me at all") to 3 ("applied to me very much"). In this study, the Urdu version was used to ensure better comprehension among the participants. High scores on each subscale indicate higher levels of emotional distress in that specific domain.

#### **Beck's Hopelessness Scale (Beck et al, 1974)**

The Beck's Hopelessness Scale (BHS), originally developed by Aaron T. Beck, was used to evaluate the participants' negative expectations about the future. It is a 20-item self-report inventory that measures three major aspects of hopelessness: feelings about the future, loss of motivation, and expectations. The scale helps in identifying the degree of pessimism and is a critical tool for assessing psychological vulnerability in students. The responses are typically recorded in a True/False format, where higher total scores reflect a greater sense of hopelessness.

#### **World Health Organization Quality of Life (World Health Organization,1996)**

To measure the overall well-being of the participants, the WHOQOL-BREF was administered. This is a 26-item abbreviated version of the WHOQOL-100, which provides a profile of the Quality of Life across four primary domains: Physical Health, Psychological Health, Social Relationships, and Environment. It also includes two standalone items for general health and overall quality of life. Each item is rated on a 5-point Likert scale. Higher scores on this instrument denote a higher perceived Quality of Life and greater satisfaction with one's current circumstances.

### Procedure

The research process commenced after obtaining formal approval from the Department of Applied Psychology at Government College University Faisalabad, ensuring all ethical protocols were strictly followed. Data collection was conducted through a systematic multi-phase approach, beginning with the recruitment of N=260 university students identified as low achievers through a convenience sampling technique. Each participant was provided with a comprehensive briefing regarding the study's objectives and was required to give informed consent, with explicit assurances of anonymity and the right to withdraw at any stage. Following this, a research booklet containing a demographic sheet and the three standardized instruments—the DASS-21, Beck's Hopelessness Scale (BHS), and the WHOQOL-BREF—was administered. The researchers remained present during the 15 to 20-minute sessions to clarify instructions and minimize potential response bias. Once the data collection was complete, the questionnaires were screened for missing values, and the valid responses were coded and entered into the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 22.0. Finally, advanced statistical analyses, including Pearson Correlation, Linear Regression, and Independent Sample t-tests, were executed to test

the hypothesized relationships between Stress, Anxiety, Hopelessness, and the Quality of Life among the participants.

**RESULTS**

**Table 1** Pearson Product-Moment Correlation among Stress, Anxiety, Hopelessness and Quality of Life (N=260)

Scales	K	M	SD	1	2	3	$\alpha$
Psychological Distress	21	41.71	7.55	1			.88
Quality of Life	26	88.67	7.58	.38**	1		.84
Hopelessness	20	5.17	1.90	.05	-.24**	1	.79

Table 1 shows that the descriptive statistics, alpha reliabilities, and the correlation matrix for all study variables. The results indicate that Quality of Life has a significant positive correlation with Stress and Anxiety ( $r = .38, p < .01$ ). Furthermore, a significant negative correlation was found between Hopelessness and Quality of Life ( $r = -.24, p < .01$ ), suggesting that as students' expectations for the future become more negative, their overall satisfaction with life significantly decreases. The internal consistency of the scales, as indicated by Cronbach's Alpha (alpha), ranged from .79 to .88, showing that the instruments used were highly reliable for this sample of low achievers.

**Table 2** Linear Regression showing Predictors of Quality of Life among Low Achievers (N=260)

Variables	B	SE	$\beta$	T	P
Stress & Anxiety	0.378	0.057	.380	6.59	.000
Hopelessness	-0.952	0.243	-.238	-3.92	.001
$R^2$	.18				
F	28.94*				

Table 2 shows that the linear regression result. The model's overall fit was statistically significant,  $F(2, 257) = 28.94, p < .001$ , accounting for approximately 18.4% of the variance ( $R^2 = .184$ ) in Quality of Life. The results indicate that Stress and Anxiety are significant positive predictors of Quality of Life scores (beta = .38,  $p < .001$ ). Interestingly, Hopelessness was found to be a significant negative predictor (beta = -.24,  $p < .01$ ), suggesting that a higher sense of pessimism regarding the future leads to a marked decline in the perceived Quality of Life.

**Table 3** Gender Differences in Stress & Anxiety, Quality of Life, and Hopelessness among Low Achievers (N=260)

Variables	Gender (n=126) (n= 134)		t	p	Cohen's d
	Boys M (SD)	Girls M (SD)			
Psychological Distress	42.50 (7.48)	40.97 (7.57)	1.63	.10	0.20
Quality of Life	88.29 (7.86)	89.04 (7.31)	-0.79	.42	0.10
Hopelessness	5.46 (1.95)	4.91 (1.81)	2.34	.02*	0.29

Table 3 shows that the independent sample t-test revealed a significant gender difference in Hopelessness (BHS),  $t(258) = 2.34, p = .02$ , with male students reporting higher levels ( $M = 5.46$ ) than females ( $M = 4.91$ ). However, no significant differences were found for Stress and Anxiety (DASS) ( $p = .104$ ) or Quality of Life ( $p = .428$ ), although males scored slightly higher in stress and females reported a marginally better quality of life. Overall, while academic pressure and life satisfaction are experienced similarly across genders, male low achievers exhibit significantly higher levels of future-oriented pessimism.

**DISCUSSION**

The primary objective of the present study was to explore the intricate relationship between the psychological constructs of Stress, Anxiety, Hopelessness, and the overall Quality of Life among low-

achieving university students. By analyzing a sample of N=260 students from Faisalabad, the research sought to determine how academic underperformance and the resulting emotional distress influence an individual's subjective sense of well-being. The findings provide strong empirical support for the hypotheses, confirming that psychological distress is a fundamental determinant of the quality of life in students facing academic challenges. The correlation analysis (Table 1) revealed that as levels of Stress and Anxiety increase, there is a significant impact on how students evaluate their life satisfaction, while higher levels of Hopelessness (Item 3) correlate significantly with a decline in Quality of Life. These results align with the broader psychological framework which posits that persistent emotional strain act as a primary barrier to holistic health.

A major highlight of this research is the significant gender difference observed in psychological vulnerability (Table 3). The results indicate that male participants possess a higher level of Hopelessness (M=5.46) compared to their female counterparts (M=4.91). This suggests that in the socio-cultural landscape of Faisalabad, male students may perceive more intense pressure regarding future career prospects and academic success, leading to a greater sense of pessimism. In contrast, female students reported a marginally better Quality of Life (M=89.04), which may reflect higher emotional resilience or better social support systems that act as a protective shield against the psychological distress mentioned by contemporary mental health researchers.

Furthermore, the results for Stress and Anxiety suggest that the academic environment for low achievers often triggers a "cycle of failure." According to cognitive theories of anxiety, when students are labeled as "defaulters," they internalize this stigma, which impairs their cognitive functions and further hinders academic recovery. The higher levels of stress reported by males in this study correlate with their increased hopelessness, suggesting that restrictive academic environments or high expectations hinder the internalization of competence and future-oriented motivation.

Finally, the regression analysis (Table 2) confirms that psychological distress factors explain approximately 18.4% of the variance in the Quality of Life of low achievers ( $R^2 = .184$ ,  $p < .001$ ). This underscores the interconnected nature of these variables and reinforces the idea that emotional stability is the primary architect of internal resilience. As students transition through the high-pressure environment of higher education, their perception of the future and their ability to manage anxiety remain the most critical predictors of their overall life satisfaction.

### **Limitations and Suggestions**

The sample was limited to Government College University Faisalabad; therefore, future research findings should be gathered from other cities across the country to improve generalizability. While three psychological domains were measured, future studies should include additional variables such as social support, coping mechanisms, and emotional intelligence. The sample size should be expanded to include a more diverse range of participants from both private and public educational institutions, as well as different academic disciplines. Future studies should move beyond self-report scales and include longitudinal designs to track how Quality of Life changes as students improve their academic ranking. Finally, specialized counseling and awareness programs should be developed within universities to help low achievers manage stress and combat hopelessness, specifically focusing on boosting their resilience and overall well-being.

### **Implementations**

The findings of this study have significant practical implications for educational policy and clinical practice within university settings. Primarily, universities must establish specialized mental health counseling cells that move beyond academic advising to address the chronic stress and evaluative anxiety prevalent among low-achieving students. By utilizing evidence-based interventions such as Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), institutions can help students deconstruct the stigma of being a "defaulter" and rebuild their self-worth. Furthermore, the high levels of hopelessness reported, particularly among male students, necessitate the launch of resilience-based workshops focused on fostering "learned

optimism" and realistic goal-setting. Educators and faculty members should also be trained to recognize the psychological markers of distress, ensuring that the academic environment acts as a support system rather than a source of further marginalization. Ultimately, these findings should be used to design holistic intervention programs that integrate emotional support with academic recovery, ensuring that the student's Quality of Life is prioritized alongside their GPA.

## CONCLUSION

The present study concludes that psychological distress specifically Stress, Anxiety, and Hopelessness serves as a fundamental determinant in shaping the Quality of Life among low-achieving university students. The findings demonstrate that high levels of emotional strain and a pessimistic outlook on the future are significantly associated with a decline in subjective well-being. Furthermore, the results highlight a significant gender difference, with male students in this sample demonstrating higher levels of hopelessness than females, despite experiencing similar levels of academic stress. Ultimately, addressing the internal psychological struggles of students is essential for fostering the resilience necessary for them to navigate the challenges of higher education effectively and improve their overall life satisfaction.

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