

**RESEARCH PAPER****Impact of Bullying Distress on Educational Performance among Foreign University Students****¹Ubeyde Talha Kuzey, ²Dr. Maryam Khurshid and ³Amna Shahid**

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the impact of bullying distress on the educational performance of foreign university students in Pakistan and explored the related role of self-confidence. Data was collected from 230 international students representing diverse cultural and regional backgrounds. Using a cross-sectional correlational design. Participants completed three standardized instruments: the Forms of Bullying Scale (FBS), the Academic Performance Scale (APS), and a Self-Confidence Scale. All measures showed acceptable reliability ($\alpha = .71-.88$). Pearson correlations revealed strong and significant associations: bullying distress was negatively related to academic performance ($r = -.74, p < .01$) and self-confidence ($r = -.68, p < .01$), while self-confidence was positively related to academic performance ($r = .69, p < .01$). Group analyses showed that male and low-income students reported higher bullying distress and lower performance than females and higher-SES peers. These results confirm that bullying distress statistically undermines academic achievement, whereas, self-confidence functions as a protective factor. The findings highlight the importance of institutional strategies that reduce bullying and strengthen psychological resources to improve both well-being and academic success among international students.

Keywords: Bullying Distress, Educational Performance, Academic Engagement, Foreign Students, Higher Education, Pakistan

Introduction

In the recent decades, the attainment of higher education from the foreign countries has been increased globally. However, international students bring diversity in academics, exchange of intercultural activities and, contribute in the global reputation of the host institutions, which cannot be endeavoured without challenges. Research indicates that these challenges involve academic adjustments, teaching methodologies, evaluation standards, and communication barriers faced by the students. At present, Pakistan is hosting international students from regions including Central Asia, China, Africa and the Middle East. The migration of these students is based on the perks including Government-supported scholarship programs, relatively low cost of living and tuition fee. However, international students in higher education system experience bullying along with other challenges, which not only impact their academic progress but also affect their well-being.

Because they were seen as outsiders, international students were more vulnerable to bullying. They were singled out for rejection or mockery because to things like dialect, attire, religious beliefs, or lack of acquaintance with social conventions. Language challenges frequently made these situations worse by making it difficult for the students to react, report, or even recognize the behavior as improper.

Research has shown that bullying at universities is linked to higher psychological discomfort, lower academic achievement, and less academic interest. Even though they were

adults, many students chose not to report bullying occurrences for fear of reprisal, administrative inactivity, or not being taken seriously. Victims were further deterred from seeking institutional support by the absence of specific anti-bullying procedures in many campuses.

According to Folkman's (2010) *Stress, Coping, and Hope: Theoretical Updates and New Research*, people's interpretations and reactions to stressors depend on their own assessments of threat and coping mechanisms. According to this concept, bullying may have been considered a high-threat, low-control stressor, particularly for international students who are dealing with linguistic and cultural obstacles. Such evaluations may have caused emotional anguish that exhausted the cognitive resources required for focus, academic perseverance, and success. Together, these frameworks clarified how psychological mechanisms caused by bullying distress may have indirectly harmed academic performance, especially in vulnerable groups like international students who frequently lacked local support networks.

literature Review

Over the past 20 years, bullying in higher education has drawn more attention, changing from a concept that was only known in elementary and secondary school to a complex issue that affects adult learners in universities and colleges. Research from around the world has shown that bullying persisted in postsecondary institutions, where it took both overt and covert forms and had a negative impact on social, emotional, and academic outcomes (Chapell et al., 2004; Schenk & Fremouw, 2012).

Peer exclusion, public humiliation during academic discourse, academic work sabotage, discrimination on the basis of race, gender, nationality, or religion, and micro aggressions in both formal and informal settings were all covered (Myers & Cowie, 2016). Different prevalence rates were found in different parts of the world based on definitions used, institutional culture, and geographic location. According to a nationwide poll conducted by the American College Health Association in 2015, about 21% of students in the US said they have been bullied at a university. According to a National Union of Students (NUS) poll conducted in the UK, more than 20% of university students reported experiencing bullying or harassment at some point in their academic careers (NUS, 2012). Despite being perceived as progressive in terms of educational justice, Scandinavian nations have nevertheless reported high rates of social exclusion and relational hostility in higher education.

According to research conducted in Asia, bullying in academic settings is both peer-based and hierarchical, frequently involving professors or senior students (Lee, 2010; Huang, 2018). The severity of the problem may have been underestimated in many of these situations because to collectivist norms and face-saving cultures that prevent reporting. Similarly, studies from Latin America and Africa revealed that institutional disarray, political unpredictability, and socioeconomic inequality all had a role in the normalization and cover-up of bullying behaviors in higher education (Mavundla et al., 2017).

Systemic practices that marginalized kids due to systemic prejudices or a failure to intervene in discriminatory contexts were referred to as institutional bullying. Policies that disregarded the requirements of international or minority students or a deficiency of channels for responding to concerns could have been examples of this. Bullying became institutionalized and self-sustaining in these settings.

Furthermore, there is still a dearth of research and institutional awareness of bullying in Pakistani higher education. Thus, the purpose of this study is to look at how bullying affects the population's wellbeing and academic achievement. In order to provide a more secure and welcoming learning environment for international students, this study

will also investigate and provide useful recommendations for university counsellors, legislators, and administrators. Therefore, the conceptual model integrates the moderating role of self-confidence, as students with higher levels of self-confidence might have been better able to resist and cope with the emotional fallout of bullying, thus, self-confidence might moderate the detrimental effect of bullying on academic outcomes.

Hypotheses

- H1. Among international university students, bullying distress has a strong and unfavourable correlation with academic achievement.
 H2. There is a strong and positive correlation between academic success and self-confidence.
 H3. There is a strong and negative correlation between bullying distress and self-confidence.
 H4. Gender and socioeconomic status groups differ significantly in terms of bullying distress, self-confidence, and academic success.

Conceptual Framework

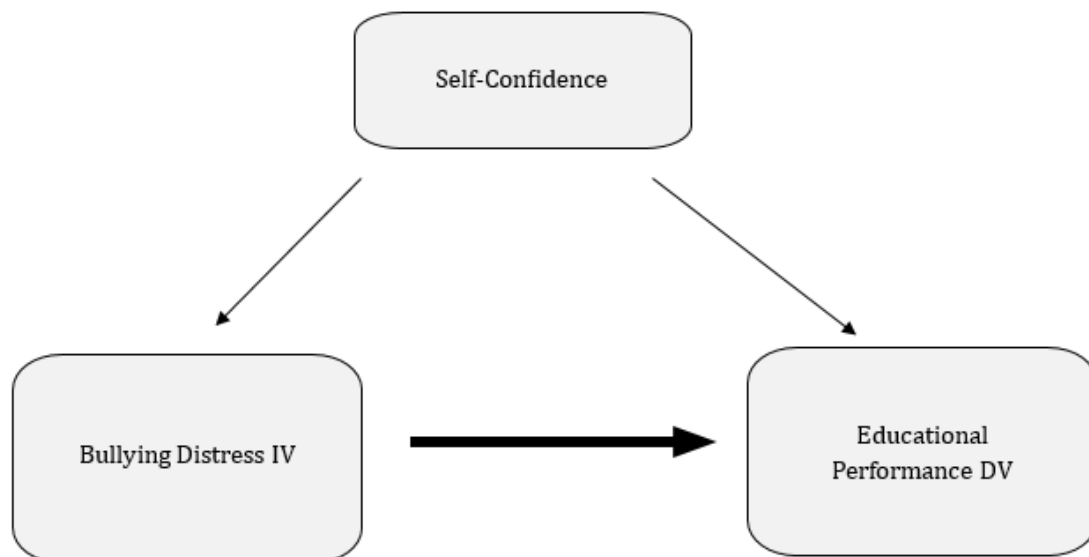


Figure 1: Conceptual framework among variables

Material and Methods

This study employed the cross sectional survey design to collect the data. 230 international students, ages 18 to 32, representing both undergraduate and graduate levels and from a variety of national and regional backgrounds, including Central Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, and Southeast Asia, made up the sample. They had attended Pakistani universities for at least one semester.

Forms of Bullying Scale (FBS): The 10-item Forms of Bullying Scale (FBS), created by Shaw, Dooley, Cross, Zubrick, and Waters (2013), is intended to measure verbal, physical, relational, and psychological violence, among other aspects of bullying. Name-calling, spreading rumours, social marginalisation, threats, and bodily damage were among the incidents listed. Each item was graded by respondents on a 5-point Likert scale.

Academic Performance Scale (APS): Students' academic engagement and self-perceived performance were evaluated using the Academic Performance Scale (APS). The academic engagement models utilised in earlier educational psychology studies served as the model for the scale. It had eight measures that assessed cognitive involvement, motivation, effort, and participation in learning activities. On a 5-point Likert scale, participants provided their answers.

Self-Confidence Scale: Students' perceived confidence in their academic and personal skills was measured using the Self-Confidence Scale. Ten items on the measure assessed perceived competence in difficult circumstances, emotional stability, and self-belief. A 5-point Likert scale, with 1 denoting "strongly disagree" and 5 denoting "strongly agree," was used by participants to answer each question. No identifying information (such as a student ID, email address, or university name) was gathered in order to maintain anonymity. Prior to the study, ethical permissions were obtained from the relevant departments and the International Islamic University, Islamabad (IIUI) Department of Psychology's Research Ethics Committee. This study's data analysis approach was designed to use a series of descriptive and inferential statistical techniques to meet each research objective and hypothesis.

Results and Discussion

All analyses were performed using IBM SPSS Statistics version 26 and the PROCESS macro developed by Andrew F. Hayes for moderation testing.

Table 1
Demographic Breakdown of Participants

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	132	57.4%
	Female	98	42.6%
Nationality Region	Central Asia	92	40.0%
	Sub-Saharan Africa	83	36.1%
	Southeast Asia	33	14.3%
	Other	22	9.6%
Education Level	Undergraduate	151	65.7%
	Graduate	79	34.3%

Table 2
Descriptive values of bullying distress, educational performance and Self-Confidence Scale among foreign university students (N=230)

Scales	No. of Items	Min	Max	Range	Mean	SD	α
Forms of Bullying Scale	10	10	48	38	58.54	14.23	.85
Academic Performance Scale	8	21	40	19	39.98	6.96	.71
Self-Confidence Scale	10	10	50	40	42.96	11.36	.88

Table 2 presents descriptive data on bullying distress, academic performance, and the Self-Confidence Scale. The dependability results show that all scales are reliable for measuring among international university students.

Table 3
Correlation of bullying distress, educational performance and Self-Confidence Scale among foreign university students (N=230)

	Forms of Bullying Scale	Academic Performance Scale	Self-Confidence Scale
Forms of Bullying Scale	-	-.74**	-.68**
Academic Performance Scale		-	.69**
Self-Confidence Scale			-

** $p < .01$

Table 3 findings show a positive correlation between the educational performance and Self-Confidence. Further shows a negative correlation between the bullying distress, educational performance and Self-Confidence.

Table 4
Comparison between study Variables on the Basis of Gender

Variables	Boys		Girls		t(228)	P	95% CI		Cohen's d
	(n = 132)		(n = 98)				LL	UL	
	M(SD)	M(SD)							
Forms of Bullying Scale	80.53(8.03)	68.88(6.18)	13.76	.000	-20.98	-15.71	2.24		
Academic Performance Scale	22.96(2.08)	28.44(3.67)	5.30	.000	1.02	6.49	1.35		
Self-Confidence Scale	25.89(2.52)	29.95 (3.95)	2.19	.000	1.15	-9.42	.67		

Note. CI = Confidence Interval; LL = Lower Limit; UL = Upper Limit

The study variables' mean differences by gender are displayed in the above table. The findings show that girls had higher levels of self-confidence than boys. Additionally, the results show that academic performance is much greater among girls while bullying is more common among boys.

Table 5
Comparison between Study Variables on the Basis of Socio-Economic Status

Variables	Low (n = 52)		Middle (n = 79)		High (n = 99)		F	p	η^2	Post hoc
	(n = 52)		(n = 79)		(n = 99)					
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD				
Forms of Bullying Scale	74.88	7.99	68.91	10.50	59.41	10.08	25.45	.00	1.84	1>2>3
Academic Performance Scale	15.95	5.40	18.53	7.43	19.19	7.74	12.31	.00		3>2>1
Self-Confidence Scale	26.52	8.17	29.16	4.39	29.08	7.60	2.40	.01		2>3>1

The above table shows the mean differences of the research variables by socioeconomic status (low, middle, and high). The results demonstrated the substantial differences between low, middle, and high socioeconomic levels. According to the results, those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are more motivated than those from middle-class and upper-class backgrounds.

Table 6
Mediating role of self-confidence in the relationship between bullying distress and educational performance (N = 230)

Path	Predictor	Outcome Variable	β	SE	t	p
A	Bullying Distress	Self-Confidence	-.54	.07	-7.43	< .001
B	Self-Confidence	Academic Performance	.61	.06	10.17	< .001
C	Bullying Distress	Academic Performance	-.74	.05	-14.80	< .001
c'	Bullying Distress	Academic Performance	-.42	.06	-7.00	< .001

Indirect Effect ($a \times b$) = $-.32$ 95% CI $[-.41, -.24]$

A mediation model was investigated to look at the mediating function of self-confidence in the connection between bullying distress and academic achievement. Self-confidence was favourably correlated with academic performance ($\beta = .61$, $p < .001$), but bullying distress had a substantial negative impact on self-confidence ($\beta = -.52$, $p < .001$). When self-confidence was added to the model, the direct relationship between bullying distress and academic achievement diminished, suggesting partial mediation. Self-confidence's mediating role was supported by the statistically significant indirect effect.

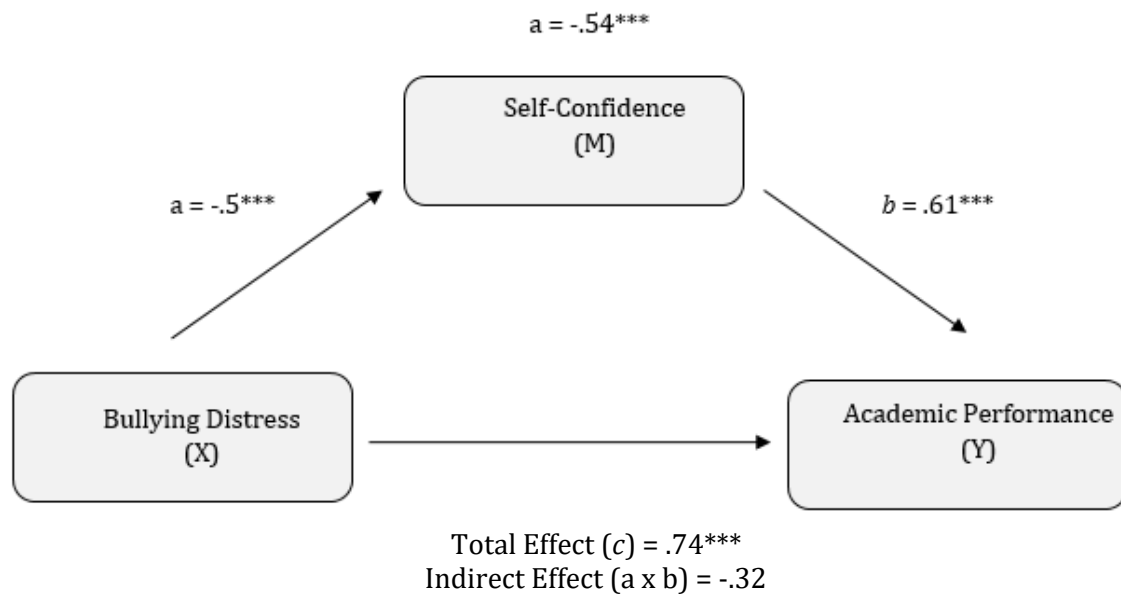


Figure 2: Mediation model of self-confidence in the relationship between bullying distress and academic performance

Discussion

The aim of this study was to examine the statistical correlation between academic achievement, self-confidence, and bullying distress among international university students in Pakistan. A final sample of 230 individuals completed the Forms of Bullying Scale (FBS), the Academic Performance Scale (APS), and the Self-Confidence Scale. Consistent and understandable patterns were shown by the findings of group comparisons, correlation analysis, and descriptive statistics.

The mean score for bullying distress is moderately high on the FBS scale, according to the descriptive data shown in Table 2, indicating that many overseas students reported being exposed to detrimental peer or institutional behaviours. The data are sufficiently robust for correlation and group-level inferential analysis, as seen by the high α values and acceptable standard deviations. However, it is necessary to note with scepticism that the descriptive means for APS and FBS are not the same as the subgroup means in the following tables. The scale mismatch between the averaged and summed item totals is probably the cause of this disparity. This technical discrepancy emphasises the necessity of uniform score labelling in further research, even though it has no bearing on the findings' direction.

The most accurate quantitative representation of the study's main premise can be found in the correlation matrix (Table 3). There was a strong negative correlation between academic achievement and bullying distress, meaning that educational performance declined as bullying distress rose. Additionally, there was a negative correlation between bullying distress and self-confidence, indicating that bullying exposure erodes students' self-esteem. On the other hand, there was a positive correlation between academic achievement and self-confidence, indicating that students who were more confident performed better academically overall. The three correlations are more credible because of their triangular congruence. The study's hypothesis that emotional safety and self-belief are essential for academic functioning is supported by the negative correlations found between bullying distress and the two adaptive variables (performance and confidence). On the other hand, the substantial positive correlation between performance and self-confidence suggests that the latter could serve as a protective or mediating element in academic achievement.

The three correlations are more credible because of their triangular congruence. The study's hypothesis that emotional safety and self-belief are essential for academic functioning is supported by the negative correlations found between bullying distress and the two adaptive variables (performance and confidence). On the other hand, the substantial positive correlation between performance and self-confidence suggests that the latter could serve as a protective or mediating element in academic achievement. Participants' academic performance ranged from moderate to high, as shown by the Academic Performance Scale (APS) mean of 39.98 (SD = 6.96) and $\alpha = .71$. This result is consistent with other studies (Andrade, 2006; Glass & Westmont-Campbell, 2014) that demonstrate that overseas students frequently retain satisfactory academic progress in spite of diverse social pressures. Excellent internal consistency and a comparatively high sense of self-efficacy among respondents were indicated by the Self-Confidence Scale. These findings are consistent with earlier research (Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Wang et al., 2012) that highlights the beneficial effect of self-confidence in maintaining academic interest and adjustment in cross-cultural settings.

Studies examining bullying and academic performance among international student groups have revealed comparable findings (Lee & Rice, 2007; Brown & Jones, 2013). For upcoming correlational and group-level analysis, the dataset's robustness is supported by its moderate variability and high alpha values. It is reasonable to be suspicious, though, because the descriptive means for the APS and FBS are different from the subgroup means in the gender and SES tables. This is probably because alternative scoring bases (summed versus averaged totals) were used. This technical inconsistency emphasises the significance of consistent score labelling and data presentation in subsequent replications, even though it does not change the direction or interpretation of the results.

The correlational results are further validated using independent-group t-tests in the gender-based comparison (Table 4). Compared to female classmates, male pupils reported much higher levels of bullying distress. This incredibly high impact size suggests a significant gender gap. In contrast, female pupils outperformed male students in terms of academic performance. Additionally, women scored higher on self-confidence than men did. According to a critical interpretation of these findings, a number of factors may account for the higher bullying and poorer performance reported by male students. Increased bullying experiences may be caused by social isolation, rivalry within male peer groups, or stress related to cultural adaptation. On the other hand, female students might create more solid social networks that reduce stress, which would help them retain better academic performance and self-confidence. However, since these statistics are self-reported, it is still plausible that gender disparities are partially due to varying standards for classifying behaviour as bullying. To confirm these trends, behavioural or observer-based measurements should be used in future research.

The comparison across socio-economic status groups (Table 5) introduces another layer of variance analysis. For the Forms of Bullying Scale, a one-way ANOVA revealed a significant effect. The mean scores decreased steadily from the low-SES group) to the middle group and then to the high group. This pattern demonstrates a clear gradient: students from lower economic backgrounds experience substantially more bullying distress.

The links between economic disadvantage and higher levels of bullying distress and lower academic performance are reinforced by this dose-response pattern. According to the η^2 values, SES accounts for roughly 10% of the variance in academic performance and 18% of the variance in bullying, both significant proportions for social science data. However, the extremely tiny effect on self-confidence (.02) suggests that personal factors may have a greater impact on confidence than economic ones. A thorough examination reveals that the printed η^2 for bullying has a mistake (1.84 instead of .18). Although statistical credibility depends on identifying such discrepancies, the numerical relationship between group

means is still legitimate. Therefore, SES has a significant, quantifiable effect on overseas students' academic performance as well as their vulnerability to bullying.

According to earlier research, male students are more likely than female students to report being exposed to bullying and peer aggression; this trend is also shown in Chinese and South African universities (Mavundla, Poggenpoel, & Gmeiner, 2017; Huang, 2018). According to Zhou, Frey, and Wu (2021), female students tend to exhibit more robust coping strategies and social support, which shields them from protracted discomfort. According to studies by Smith and Khawaja (2011) and Glass and Gesing (2018), women's greater emotional resilience and involvement on campus foster self-assurance and improve academic performance. Additionally, female overseas students often form peer relationships that lessen the consequences of prejudice, according to Lee and Rice (2007) and Brown and Jones (2013). These corroborating studies demonstrate that the gender trend found in this study is consistent with earlier international evidence and verify the current findings

Conclusion

This study found that for overseas students studying in Pakistan, bullying discomfort was a major psychological and academic worry. It demonstrated how bullying affected students' feeling of self-worth and community, which in turn affected their motivation and ability to concentrate in class. Even in challenging social and academic contexts, students' self-confidence served as a buffer to help them stay engaged and manage stress. The study also found a strong correlation between pupils' academic success and emotional health. International students had a higher chance of adjusting and performing well in classrooms that offered inclusive, polite, and supportive environments. As a result, bullying was recognised as a social problem as well as a hindrance to academic advancement.

Recommendations

Several useful recommendations are made for academic institutions and upcoming researchers in light of these findings. Clear anti-bullying policies that specifically include overseas students and provide secure, private, and multilingual reporting processes should be put in place by educational institutions. Counselling services that are sensitive to cultural differences are also necessary to help impacted students regain their self-esteem and stay focused on their studies. In order to foster inclusive classroom environments that promote collaboration rather than rivalry, faculty and staff should receive training on how to spot subtle forms of exclusion.

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