

A Cross-cultural Analysis of Optimism Level, Academic Achievement, and Subjective Happiness among University Students

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Abstract

Background. This study examined the influence of university students' optimism on their academic performance and subjective well-being in two provinces of Pakistan, Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

Method. The sample comprised 301 university students from Punjab ($n=151$) and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa ($n=150$), with a distribution of 130 men and 171 females. Convenient sampling was employed for data collection.

Results. The correlational study found a statistically significant positive relationship between university students' optimism, academic accomplishment, and subjective happiness. The statistical research further reveals that optimism is a powerful predictor of subjective satisfaction and academic accomplishment among university students. An analysis of gender revealed that females exhibit higher levels of subjective pleasure and academic achievement compared to males. Moreover, the comparison analysis indicated that students from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (*KP*) universities exhibit higher levels of optimism and obtain superior academic results compared to their counterparts from universities in Punjab.

Conclusion. The findings of this study will be advantageous for future researchers and professionals in psychology and counseling, as they can utilize them to cultivate positive coping strategies in young individuals. This, in turn, can lead to improved academic prospects and enhanced personal well-being.

Keywords. Optimism level, academic achievement, subjective happiness, university students, cross-cultural study.



Introduction

The educational environment in Pakistan has become more competitive, leading to increased stress and challenges for university students. University scholars need to achieve excellence to serve after getting a degree to earn a better future in the practical field. So, there is constant worry about the future and a lot of daunting news available about the value of a degree, challenges in the job market, economic conditions, etc. As a result, the university environment is structured to promote learning, optimism, and critical thinking by presenting students with academic difficulties. Optimism is essential for success, and it refers to a person's predisposition to expect good and positive outcomes in general when confronted with negative situations in life (Hoy et al., 2006). Optimism is a good personality trait that has easily attracted new trends in the field of mind sciences such as psychology throughout the last two decades (Peterson, 2000). According to Nupur and Mahapatro (2016), happiness is like energy, liveliness, motion, and enthusiasm, and it may also combat stress and negative thoughts in human existence. Sarouni et al. (2016) stated that failure and painful circumstances are not the only things that have a significant impact on a person's pessimism; rather, people's coping strategies have a stronger impact on their achievement inclinations in life. Thus, optimism is required when dealing with difficult occurrences in life. According to control theory, self-regulatory performance is an important component of optimism in a person's life. It also holds that people may continue to progress and attain their goals in good circumstances, regardless of the difficulties in their path (McGuigan & Hoy, 2006).

Optimism in academics is considered a construct including three dimensions, firstly collective efficacy of faculty members, mutual trustworthiness between parents and students along with faculty, and the university's academic emphasis. It was narrated specifically that optimism in education is like an interactive belief system that the university faculty can help students to acquire good grades and to cooperate with the parents of the students in this venture. It also affirms students that can achieve their academic goals with great success (Moksnes & Espnes, 2012). It has been noticed through different studies

that university scholars are usually disheartened about their studies and future *GPA*s' due to pessimism which can lead them towards serious psychological harm and more negative thoughts, depression, and in severe cases even suicide (Parmar, 2014). Due to such negativity, students usually become the victim of cognitive distortions overgeneralize their problems, and lose control over their minute daily life activities and adaptive behaviors (Wagner & Dipaola, 2011). For being successful in academics it's mandatory to function optimistically. For achieving such optimal functioning in education, skills like establishing an optimistic approach toward life have been proven to be beneficial for students to improve their self-concept, academic grades, and interpersonal relationships as well (Scott et al., 2004). Earlier research indicated that optimistic students could handle adversity and face challenges more appropriately and happily than pessimists and this has psychological benefits as well (Brisette et al., 2002). Optimistic students have better task orientation and performance than pessimists (Norem & Chang, 2002; Shaheen, 2015). Optimism has behavioral roots, and it allows people to be more successful, happier, and healthier in life and has a significant relationship between the happiness of a being with optimism (Lopez et al., 2003).

Establishing optimism within an educational institute caters to the mindset that is invaluable and precious, and it also motivates all the educationists and staff members to get engaged in the university students' academic achievement. Optimism is a part of positive thinking, and a layman can define it as seeing the glass of water as half full and looking silver lining around the black clouds (Sarouni et al., 2016). Research findings explained that the relationship between optimism and its opposite has a direct link with academic achievement and job-related traits like career maturity, decision-making, and career goals among university students (Creed et al., 2002).

Previous studies on gender differences indicated that male participants have more career orientation and goal-directed behavior due to optimism level than female participants, males seemed to be more mature than females in this regard (Petrone, 2000). Another study revealed that positive thinking skills lead to happiness and higher academic grades (Urry & Gross, 2010). Gender studies revealed that if males believe and become

optimistic in life then they feel that they have control over their choices and can make better performance in life and academics as well while females have the positive impact of optimism for their striving toward goals (Srivastava & Agarwal, 2013). Some contradictory literature shown in studies like those of Tkach and Lyubomirsky (2006) that happiness-increasing strategies have non-significant gender differences, and they concluded that men and women respond to happiness in the same way.

Moradi et al. (2014) studied the association between students' optimism and their grades among university males showing that there is a positive significant relationship between the variables mentioned. It was seen that the happiness of students is at the edge due to the negative traits in their personalities like pessimism and despair, at a young age (Snyder & Lopez, 2001). It has been mentioned in a study that strengthening resilience, a high level of achievement, and satisfaction have a deep association with happiness. University students with higher achievement and good grades are more satisfied in their lives than low achievers. This is due to their way of seeing situations with positivity in life (Saleem & Rafique, 2012). Optimistic students have higher levels of well-being than others who have pessimistic thoughts and personality traits (Lai & Yue, 2014). Happy students perceive things better, are safer, and are more confident about the future. They are more cooperative and supportive towards fellows and make sound decisions (Bachman et al., 2011). Empirical evidence indicates that the physical and mental wellbeing of scholars depends on traits like optimism, self-esteem, academic success, extraversion, and happiness (Scheier et al., 2001).

Given the literature, the present work was formulated because there was no substantial data available in past research regarding comparative studies in different Pakistani provinces. University students from Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) were selected for the present study as they have varied cultural and environmental influences on the mental state of the pupils. The students of these provinces have different approaches toward life and academics due to different situational factors. So, to see the characteristics like optimism and happiness along with the academic achievement of university students, the following hypotheses were formulated.

Method

Hypotheses

1. Optimism level positively predicts university students' academic achievement and subjective happiness.
2. There are differences in scores on optimism level, academic achievement, and subjective happiness among university students of both provinces.
3. There are gender differences in optimism level, academic achievement, and subjective happiness of university students.

Sample & Design

The study drew 301 participants overall, 150 from universities in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and 151 from institutions in Punjab. Rather than by random selection, participants were picked using a convenience sampling method—that is, based more on their availability and accessibility to the researchers. This approach guaranteed effective data collecting from the larger population. Participants were mainstream students including graduates ($n=200$) and postgraduates ($n=101$).

Exclusion Criteria. The present study did not include university students undergoing psychiatric or physical treatment. The study excluded students who faced challenges in comprehending the basic English language.

Assessment Measures

Life Orientation Test-Revised (LOT-R). It is a 10-item scale developed by Carver, Scheier, and Bridges (2013). It has 5-point Likert-type scoring, and responses ranged from 1 = I agree a lot to 5 = I disagree a lot. Reverse scoring items included items 2, 5, 6, and 8. Responses were summed (after reversals as needed) such that higher scores represent a high level of optimism. Alpha reliability is from 0.69 to 0.72 (Wimberly et al., 2008).

Subjective Happiness Scale (SHS). A 4-item scale was developed by Lyubomirsky and Lepper (1999). It has the 7-point Likert type scoring, where a higher score reflects more happiness in the individual. The alpha reliability ranged from 0.79 to 0.94 (Schwartz

et al., 2002).

Academic Achievement measure. It was measured by the *CGPA* of university students.

Procedure

Initially, the heads of the departments were briefed on the objectives of the study as well as its characteristics. After that, the participants were inquired about their willingness to give their informed permission. The participants in the study were chosen for the study based on certain criteria

that were used to exclude them. Following the completion of the demographic form, the directions to subsequently complete the connected surveys were then followed. The scales for the study were given out in a group setting during the hours that the university was open. After the completion of the scales, participants were questioned about any questions or concerns they might have. This was done to eliminate the likelihood of any misconceptions regarding the scales.

Results

Table 1

Descriptive properties and reliability coefficient of study variables (N=301).

Variables	K	α	M	SD	Range	
					Min	Max
Life Orientation Test-Revised	10	.68	28.14	3.98	15	39
Subjective Happiness Scale	04	.90	21.94	3.12	14	28

Findings in Table 1 indicated descriptive properties of Life orientation and subjective happiness scale of university students. The reliability coefficient shows high internal consistency among the items of optimism and happiness scales.

Table 2

Linear regression analysis showing the effect of optimism level on academic achievement & subjective happiness of university students (N=301).

Variable	β	Academic Achievement	
		95% CI	
		LL	UL
(Constant)	2.3***	1.5	2.4
Optimism Level	.046***	.03	.06
R^2	.097		
F	31.94***		
Subjective Happiness			
Variable	β	95% CI	
		LL	UL
(Constant)	19.04***	16.53	21.54
Optimism Level	.10*	.12	.18
R^2	.016		
F	4.98*		

Table 2 indicated linear regression analysis with optimism level as the predictor variable whereas academic achievement and subjective happiness as outcome variables. The findings showed that optimism level positively predicts academic achievement ($p < .001$). The .10 value of R^2 indicates that the model explains 10% of the variance. Similarly, the findings also showed that optimism level positively predicts the subjective happiness of university students ($p < .05$). The .02 value of R^2 indicates that the model explains 2% of the variance. This confirms hypothesis 1.

Table 3

Mean, standard deviation, and t-values on optimism level, academic achievement, and subjective happiness among university students of Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (N=301).

Variables	Male (n=130)		Female (n=171)		t (299)	p	95% CI		Cohen's d
	M	SD	M	SD			LL	UL	
Optimism Level	28.15	4.3	25.40	3.6	.016	.001	.91	.92	0.69
Academic Achievement	3.21	.60	3.42	.56	-3.07	.002	-.34	-.07	0.36
Subjective Happiness	19.64	2.9	22.32	3.17	-5.18	.002	-1.7	-.39	0.88

Provinces									
Variables	Punjab (n=151)		KP (n=150)		t (299)	p	LL	UL	Cohen's d
	M	SD	M	SD					
Optimism Level	26.17	3.7	30.13	3.1	-19.9	.000	-4.7	-3.18	1.16
Academic Achievement	3.18	.55	3.48	.59	-4.54	.000	-.42	-.16	0.53
Subjective Happiness	22.82	3.8	20.87	4.0	20.3	.000	8.23	1.27	0.50

Table 3 indicated the significant mean differences, standard deviation and t-values of optimism level males ($M=28.15$, $SD=4.3$) and females ($M=25.40$, $SD=3.6$), academic achievement males ($M=3.21$, $SD=0.60$) and females ($M=3.42$, $SD=0.56$) and subjective happiness males ($M=19.64$, $SD=2.9$) and females ($M=22.32$, $SD=3.17$) with $t(299) = 0.01, -3.07, -5.18, p < .01$ respectively. Furthermore, table 3 showed the significant mean differences, standard deviation, and t-values of optimism level among university students from Punjab ($M=26.17$, $SD=3.7$) and KP ($M=30.13$, $SD=3.1$), the academic achievement of university students of Punjab ($M=3.18$, $SD=0.55$) and KP ($M=3.48$, $SD=0.59$) and subjective happiness of Punjab ($M=22.82$, $SD=3.8$) and KP ($M=20.87$, $SD=4.0$) university students with $t(299) = -19.9, -4.54, 20.3, p < .001$ respectively. This table confirms the hypotheses 3 and 4.

Discussion

The present study was conducted on university students in two provinces of Pakistan: Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. This present work examined the effect of the optimism level of university scholars on their academic achievement and subjective happiness. It has been found that optimism is a strong predictor of students' high grades and happiness. Here cross-cultural study was essential for understanding how psychological concepts like optimism, academic accomplishment, and subjective satisfaction vary between cultures. Considering optimism's cultural roots can assist evaluate whether it's generally beneficial or if it's influenced by culture, society, or education. Cross-cultural analysis helps us understand if academic performance determinants are the same across cultures or modified by cultural expectations and educational techniques. Studying subjective pleasure in numerous cultures can reveal how cultural perceptions and experiences of happiness affect well-being. This study uses cross-cultural research to find universal and culturally specific relationships between optimism, academic achievement, and subjective happiness. Creating psychologically informed theories and interventions that are culturally sensitive and can be implemented in many educational and social settings requires this understanding.

The first hypothesis stated that optimism level positively affects university students' academic achievement and subjective happiness. The statistical outcome was significant, and the hypothesis has been accepted (Table 2). This result confirmed the previous research as Roothman et al. (2003) indicated that optimism positively affects pupils' achievement in public educational institutions. Another study of university students found that their optimism referred to the mode of life that can anticipate the way these students think, feel, and act in different circumstances. University pupils with the ability to anticipate positive outcomes are likely to become part of career-related activities, set vocational goals, and have healthy emotions. They can accomplish more in life and have happy outcomes (Bastianello et al., 2014). Optimism has a positive regulatory role in men's and women's academics and career

achievements (Perez, 2012). It was found in the previous study that happiness has a strong positive effect on the hopefulness, optimism, forgiveness, and excitement levels of people (Froh et al., 2009).

The second hypothesis investigated the differences in scores on optimism level, academic achievement, and subjective happiness among university students of both provinces. The statistical outcomes indicated that *KP* students have higher optimism levels and academic achievement than the university students of Punjab (Table 3). On a general and cultural basis, the students who came up to the level of the university have optimism and they already secured good grades at the higher secondary level as well. So, they have the attitude of doing hard work with a positive, optimistic approach and earning good grades in their degrees. In this way, they can draw a high professional competency not only in their province but at national and international levels as well. Another factor is that; the *KP* students have strong faith in future blessings, and they remain more optimistic even in strict environments and hard circumstances while Punjab students are more practical in their approach and tend to be happier in the presence of opportunities they receive in their province. Whilst the statistical results indicated that subjective happiness is more in the university students of Punjab it might be ascribable to the varied activities that can divert the pressure of studies from their minds. In Punjab, girls have equal opportunities of exhibiting their talent and academic achievements while in *KP*, situations are a little harder for girls which might be the reason for their low level of happiness.

Lastly, it was hypothesized that there are gender differences in university students' optimism level, academic achievement, and subjective happiness. Results were significant (Table 3) and have consistent findings which previous literature proclaimed on the similar variable. It was explored in earlier studies that females analyze their happiness based on higher self-esteem, closed family ties, and religion, whereas males record their happiness by their relaxation, leisure, and mental control; hence females are more prone to happiness than men (Reid, 2004). Past research suggested that happiness is linked with influencing factors

like subjective well-being for a female more than males (Nupur & Mahapatro, 2016). The literature revealed that university male students are more optimistic than females and males of middle age and later phases of life (Wani et al., 2016). It was recorded in past research that happy females have better academic results than males and pessimistic female companions (Gorsy & Panwar, 2016). Another research found that females are more prone to happiness (Jiang et al., 2016). Because of the above-stated outcomes; this study would be helpful for researchers working on comparative studies among Pakistani provinces.

Conclusion

The research outcomes provided an understanding that optimism level has a strong positive influence on the happiness and academic grading of university students. This further revealed that all three variables are positively correlated with each other and gender differences along with the provisional differences were also present. The study literature regarding the comparative analysis of Punjab and KP was scarce. Present work could prove valuable for the Pakistani researchers to take this work further and to aid students in improving their optimism level, and happiness and to yield better grades in fast pace competitive environment. Educational psychologists and counselors of both provinces can take advantage of this study; to enhance the motivation and optimism level of university students.

Limitations and Suggestions

Though the present study was done with utmost effort and intent of best possible accuracy, a few shortcomings were considered by the end of the research.

1. The sample collected in this study was not taken through random sampling which may limit the extent of representativeness of this study.
2. More reliable results could be yielded by gathering data from all over Pakistan.
3. Qualitative research designs and more demographic and geographic variables could be included for future studies with similar constructs.

Declaration

Conflict of Interest: The authors affirm that there is no conflict of interest associated with the publication of this paper.

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Data Accessibility: The corresponding author is willing to provide the data that substantiates the findings of this study upon receipt of a reasonable request.

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