Coping Strategies and Attachment Styles as Predictors of Psychological Distress among Pakistani Students Living Abroad

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ABSTRACT: The present study examined the relationship among attachment styles, coping strategies, and psychological distress in Pakistani students living abroad. A correlational cross-sectional survey design was applied, and purposive sampling was used to recruit 100 Pakistani students (62 Males, 38 females) enrolled in international universities. Participants were assessed using a demographic sheet, Attachment Style Questionnaire (ASQ; Oudenhoven & Hofstra, 2008), the Brief Cope (Carver, 1997), and the Depression Anxiety Stress Scale -21 (DASS-21; Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995). Pearson Correlation analysis indicated that preoccupied and fearful attachment styles were positively related to psychological distress. Emotion-focused and avoidant coping strategies also showed significant positive relationships with psychological distress. Multiple regression analysis revealed that both attachment styles and coping strategies significantly predicted psychological distress. Additionally, an independent-samples t-test showed that male students used significantly more avoidant coping strategies than female students. Findings underscore the importance of attachment styles and maladaptive coping strategies in explaining psychological distress among Pakistani students living abroad. The present study also highlights the need for cultural-level interventions that are designed to improve coping strategies and psychological well-being among Pakistani students living abroad. The current study also supports the existing literature by offering grounds from the Pakistani context and implications for policy development, counselling services, and future research for students' mental health and adaptation abroad.

KEYWORDS: Pakistani Students Living Abroad, Attachment Styles, Coping Strategies, Psychological Distress

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Introduction

Higher education abroad is considered a valuable asset for Pakistani students, offering opportunities to acquire internationally recognized qualifications, relevant skills, and advanced knowledge. Pakistan is not an exception to the growing trend of students who are migrating abroad for higher education because of scarcity, economic instability, unemployment, limited higher education opportunities, and the desire for better careers. Thousands of

Pakistani students travel abroad in search of higher education possibilities and a more secure future. According to Ume & Fiaz (2018), lack of professional opportunities and economic challenges in Pakistan are significant contributors of this growing trend. In addition to academic opportunities for Pakistani students, studying abroad can help them achieve long-term financial security and social mobility. Despite all the gains, relocating to a new country requires a number of emotional, social, and psychological hurdles. Students who live abroad are required to adjust to entirely different educational frameworks, language, social structures, and environment. Moving from familiar social and cultural settings to a new culture can develop feelings of uncertainty, loneliness, homesickness, emotional instability, and identity confusion. Lack of traditional support networks and cultural cues frequently leads to "cultural shock," a syndrome marked by psychological distress due to the challenges of adjusting to a new cultural setting. Such events can significantly impact students' overall psychological functioning and mental health. Some additional stressors that Pakistani students studying abroad have to deal with are language hurdles, academic demands, financial strains, cultural differences, and being cut off from their family support systems. Some students show resilience and adjust well to these challenges, while some suffer significant psychological distress. Anxiety, loneliness, and stress are just a few unpleasant emotional states that come in the category of psychological distress that are caused by an incapacity to manage stress (Kessler et al., 2003).

Coping strategies, Attachment styles, and psychological distress have a dynamic and reciprocal interaction. This study aims to enhance our knowledge of the particular difficulties which Pakistani students face studying abroad and find ways to improve their mental health by examining how attachment styles affect coping strategies and psychological distress (Abolmaali et al., 2014). Attachment is a long-lasting emotional connection that develops between people and their work and thus affects relationships throughout life. Individuals are biologically predisposed to form emotional bonds with attachment figures for the purpose of survival and emotional stability (Lazarus & Folkman's, 1984). Attachment styles include secure attachment and other forms of attachment that are insecure, such as fearful-avoidant, anxious-preoccupied, and dismissive-avoidant (Bowlby, 1982). Secure attachment develops when carers are constantly and emotionally present, supportive, and responsive. Individuals who are securely bonded manifest resilience, adaptive coping strategies, successful interpersonal interactions and emotional stability. Inconsistent, rejecting, or negligent caregiving experiences led to insecure attachment, which is associated with interpersonal challenges, emotional dysregulation, and psychological distress (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). The present study focuses on Pakistani students studying abroad who frequently deal with main stressors such as the dissolution of their initial support systems, being away from home, and uncertainty about their future opportunities. Insecure attachment in individuals leads to maladaptive adjustment issues such as anxiety and loneliness compared to securely attached individuals.

Coping is a dynamic process that is influenced by situational demands, environmental settings, and individual assessments rather than just a personality trait. Effective coping strategies lead to emotional regulation, stress management, problem solving, and mental health maintenance. Problem-focused coping deals with coping with stress and problem-solving. Emotion-focused coping encompasses dealing with the emotional responses through acceptance, emotional support, and relaxation. While avoidant coping, which is a denial, withdrawal, or disengagement from a stressor, is often associated with high levels of anxiety, depression, and stress, problem- focused and emotion -focused coping strategies are generally related to better psychological outcomes (Compas et al., 2001). Coping strategies need to be learned by Pakistani students living abroad in order to handle the demands of their studies, financial pressure, social isolation, and cultural adjustment. Coping mechanism efficacy is very crucial for Pakistani students living abroad to manage stress and maintain mental stability. Adaptive coping strategies include solving problems, positive reframing, seeking out social support, resilience, and psychological well-being. Whereas

poor adjustment and increased emotional distress are linked to dysfunctional coping strategies such as avoidance and withdrawal (Ellis et al. 2008).

Psychological distress is an important outcome of both attachment styles and coping strategies. Psychological distress involves a variety of emotional and psychological problems such as depression, anxiety, stress, fear, hopelessness, and emotional instability. It emerges when people perceive they are unable to cope with stressful life events or environmental demands effectively. Psychological distress is an unpleasant emotional state that includes both cognitive and physiological symptoms of anxiety and depression (Shaikh et al., 2004). The consequences of psychological distress reach across multiple domains of functioning. Ongoing distress impacts physical health, academic achievement, interpersonal relationships, self-esteem, and occupational functioning. Students experiencing psychological distress may have trouble focusing, feel emotionally depleted, have sleep problems, lack motivation, and have difficulties with social interactions. If left untreated, long-term distress predisposes a person to serious psychological conditions such as major depression, anxiety disorders, and suicidal ideation (Barlow & Durand, 1999). Moreover, the existing literature emphasizes the inter-relationship between attachment styles, coping strategies, and psychological distress. Secure attachment is linked with adaptive coping skills and emotional resilience, which may buffer against distress vulnerability. Insecure attachment, on the other hand, has often been related to maladaptive coping strategies such as emotional avoidance, dependency, and withdrawal, which lead to greater psychological problems. Coping strategies may also mediate the relationship between attachment and psychological outcomes, suggesting that individuals' attachment orientations influence their responses to stress and emotion regulation (Mahler, 1967). Among international students' populations, there are several empirical studies that support these associations. Students with secure attachment styles reported higher levels of psychological well-being and social support than those with insecure attachment styles. Anxious attachment was found to be associated with higher acculturative stress in Chinese international students by Wang and Scalise (2009). Similarly, Wei (2005) found that secure attachment positively predicted social integration and academic adjustment.

Research also suggests that adaptive coping strategies play a protective role. Problem-focused coping was found to be associated with better psychological well-being, while avoidance-based coping was associated with poorer mental health outcomes. International students with secure parental attachment also had adaptive coping and psychological resilience. Additionally, social support, resilience, and cultural identity have been identified as important protective factors that buffer against psychological distress during cultural transitions (Cassidy & Shaver, 2008). Similar results are reported in studies of Pakistani students abroad. Mahmood & Khan (2018) discovered that cultural values maintenance, social support, and religious coping positively predicted psychological well-being among Pakistani students living abroad.

Similarly, Bashir & Khalid (2022) identified academic pressure, problems with cultural adjustment, and language barriers as the major stressors for Pakistani students abroad. Better adjustment and lower levels of distress were related to adaptive coping strategies and strong familial support systems. Despite the growing body of literature examining coping, attachment, and psychological distress among international students, limited research has been conducted with the population of Pakistani students living abroad while exploring these variables. Most studies focus on Western or East Asian student populations, leaving an important gap in understanding the unique socio-cultural perspective of Pakistani students living abroad. Due to the collectivistic culture and strong family bonds of Pakistani students living abroad, coping strategies, attachment styles and psychological outcomes are significantly different from other cultural groups. Therefore, the present study aims to explore coping strategies, attachment styles, and psychological distress among Pakistani students living abroad. By examining how attachment styles influence coping mechanisms and psychological outcomes, the current study will be helpful to the broader understanding of Pakistani students' mental health within a culturally sensitive framework.

Rationale

Pakistani students who move abroad to study face significant changes in cultural norms, language barriers, academic obstacles, and general adjustment in a new environment. Their sense of belonging and security can be disturbed by this abrupt change. It is very crucial to understand the ways in which Pakistani students living abroad exhibit attachment styles and the process of adaptation and emotional stability in the new cultural setting. Cultural norms and values have an important role in the coping strategies that individuals use when faced with different stressors related to a new environment. Pakistani culture holds a strong emphasis on collectivism, familial bonds, and social support networks. However, students may find it difficult to access these social support networks when they go abroad, which may force them to use alternative coping strategies. Investigating the coping strategies employed by Pakistani students living abroad adds to the conversation on resilience and cross-cultural psychology by providing insights into how they deal with academic stress, cultural differences and social isolation. Pakistani students may experience homesickness, identity problems, and academic pressure that can have a bad effect on their psychological health. There is a reciprocal relationship between attachment patterns, coping strategies and psychological distress. Higher levels of discomfort are linked with maladaptive coping strategies and insecure attachment styles. Exploring their correlations in the context of Pakistani students living abroad can guide targeted interventions to enhance psychological well-being. The findings of the current study can contribute to interventions and support services that are culturally sensitive and are designed to meet the needs of Pakistani students living abroad. Universities and counselling facilities can create interventions that promote a sense of belonging and improve coping strategies among students living abroad by identifying the common attachment styles and coping mechanisms linked to improved psychological outcomes. Furthermore, enhancing intellectual awareness and offering channels for peer support might operate as a defense mechanism against psychological distress.

Objectives

1. To investigate the relationship between attachment styles, psychological distress, and coping strategies among Pakistani students living abroad.
2. To examine gender differences in attachment styles, coping strategies and psychological distress among students living abroad.
3. To investigate the predictive role of attachment styles and coping strategies in psychological distress among Pakistani students living abroad.

Hypotheses

1. Insecure attachment styles (anxious and avoidant) will be positively associated with psychological distress, whereas secure attachment will be negatively associated with psychological distress among Pakistani students living abroad. Problem-focused coping will be negatively associated with psychological distress, whereas emotion-focused and avoidant coping will be positively associated with psychological distress among Pakistani students living abroad.
2. Insecure attachment styles (anxious and avoidant) and maladaptive coping strategies (emotion-focused and avoidant) will positively predict psychological distress, whereas secure attachment and problem-focused coping will negatively predict psychological distress among Pakistani students living abroad.
3. Female Pakistani students will report higher levels of psychological distress, greater use of emotion-focused coping, and higher anxious attachment than male students, whereas male students will report higher levels of avoidant attachment and avoidant coping.

Method

The present study was conducted to explore the association between coping strategies, attachment styles, and psychological distress among Pakistani students living abroad.

Research Design

The study applied a correlational cross-sectional research approach to evaluate the relationship among coping strategies, attachment styles, and psychological distress in Pakistani students living abroad.

Participants

A total of 100 Pakistani students living abroad participated in the present study. Among the participants, 62% were male and 38% were female. The age of the participants ranged across young adulthood, with a mean age of 24.23 years (SD = 4.16). The population was sampled using non-probability purposive sampling techniques. The study excluded students living in Pakistan for online studies, Pakistani students living abroad since childhood, and any university student who was diagnosed with mental or physical health issues.

Operational Definition of Variables

Attachment Style: Attachment style is defined as an individual's score on secure, fearful, dismissing, and preoccupied subscales of the Attachment Styles Questionnaire (Oudenhoven & Hofstra, 2008).

Coping Strategies: Coping strategies are an individual's score on avoidant, problem-focused coping, and emotion-focused coping subscales on the Brief COPE (Carver, 1997).

Psychological Distress: Psychological distress is defined as an individual's score on the Depression, Anxiety, Stress Scales (DASS-21(Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995).

Assessment Measures

Demographic Information Questionnaire: The questionnaire for demographic data was created and contained questions about participant characteristics such as age, gender, currently enrolled program, institute, number of siblings, birth order, relationship status, country of stay, duration of stay abroad, and medical and psychiatric conditions.

Attachment Style Questionnaire

Attachment Style Questionnaire (ASQ) was employed to identify the attachment style of Pakistani students living abroad. The questionnaire, containing 24 items in the English language, was developed by Jan Peter van Oudenhoven and Jacomijn Hofstra in 2008. Respondents give answers on a 5-point scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The internal consistencies (Cronbach's alpha) of the fearful, preoccupied, secure and dismissive attachment styles are 0.79, 0.80, 0.75 and 0.62 respectively (Oudenhoven & Hofstra, 2008).

Depression, Anxiety and Stress scale-21 items (DASS-21): The Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scale - 21 Items (DASS-21) was developed by Lovibond and Lovibond in 1995. It has subscales which are meant to assess the levels of depression, anxiety and stress. A high score on each subscale indicates high levels of stress, anxiety, and depression. The overall Cronbach's alpha for the DASS-21 scale is 0.74. The DASS-21 subscales have Cronbach's alpha values of 0.66, 0.29 and 0.52 for depression (DASS-D), anxiety (DASS-A) and stress (DASS-S), respectively (Moya et al., 2022).

Brief COPE: The brief-COPE is an abbreviated version of the COPE (Coping Orientation to Problems Experienced) Inventory, a self-report questionnaire developed to assess a broad range of coping responses. It was developed by Carver in 1997. This instrument, consisting of 28 items, has 14 subscales comprised of 2 items each.

Each subscale evaluates the degree to which the respondent uses the coping strategy. These 28 items can also be grouped together under three subscales of problem-focused coping (α=0.96), emotion-focused coping (α=0.88), and avoidance coping (α=0.90) (Carver, 1997; Folkman, 2013).

Procedure

Prior to data collection, permission to use the questionnaire was formally obtained from the original authors. Data were collected through an online survey using Google Forms. Participants were approached through various online platforms and were provided with a detailed introduction outlining the purpose and objectives of the study. All participants gave their electronic informed consent prior to participation. Participants received assurance that their answers would remain anonymous and confidential, and that the information gathered would only be used for the study. Additionally, participants were made aware that their involvement in the study was entirely voluntary and that they might leave at any time without facing any negative consequences. After giving their agreement, participants filled out the DASS-21, Brief COPE, Attachment Styles Questionnaire, and a demographic information form. The internet platform was used to administer the questions in a predetermined order. To guarantee accuracy and consistency, completed replies were examined for missing or insufficient information. After the completion of data collection, participants were thanked for their valuable time and cooperation. The data were evaluated using SPSS, version 26.0. Descriptive and inferential statistical analyses were conducted in accordance with the objectives and hypotheses of the study.

Results

The study sought to explore the relationship between attachment styles, coping strategies and psychological distress among Pakistani students living abroad. The statistical analysis included correlation, t-test and multiple hierarchical regression. The table below shows the correlation results.

Table 1

Correlation among Demographics, Attachment styles, Coping strategies and Psychological distress.

Variables	*n*	*M*	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
1. Age	100	-	-	-															
2. Gender[a]	100	.38	.49	-.07	-														
3. No. of siblings	100	-	-	-.08	-.11	-													
4. Rel status[b]	100	-	-	.43**	.08	-.07	-												
5. Medical condition	100	-	-	.12	.20*	-.12	.03	-											
6. Secure	100	3.3	.5	.06	.07	-.14	.16	.10	-										
7. Fearful	100	3.3	.8	.06	-.04	-.04	-.09	-.06	.19	-									
8. Dismissing	100	3.7	.7	-.02	-.13	-.04	-.13	-.11	.37** *	.41** *	-								
9. Preoccu	100	3.1	.6	.0	.03	-.13	.05	.16	.21*	.38** *	-.03	-							
10. Prob focused	100	2.8	.6	.08	.09	-.15	-.01	.05	.35** *	.14	.21*	.14	-						
11.Emo focused	100	2.4	.4	.10	.0	-.05	-.04	.19	.36** *	.25*	.05	.37** *	,62** *	-					
12.Avoid coping	100	2.1	.6	-.07	-.22*	.13	-.22*	.04	.13	.34** *	.11	.41** *	.32**	.60** *	-				
13. Depression	100	6.1	5.1	.06	-.15	.14	-.01	-.06	.16	.24*	.13	.32**	.03	.42** *	.51** *	-			
14. Anxiety	100	5.7	4.7	.09	-.05	.25*	-.01	-.03	.14	.32**	.07	.38** *	.05	.43** *	.57** *	.82** *	-		

15. Stress	100	6.9	4.8	.11	-.04	.11	-.04	.01	.24*	.37** *	.17	.42** *	.13	.45** *	.51** *	.79** *	.81** *	-
16.Psy distress	100	18.7	13.7	.09	-.09	.18	-.01	-.03	.19	.33**	.13	.40** *	.07	.46** *	.57** *	.93** *	.94** *	.93** *	-

Note. N= 100, *p< .05. **p<.01. ***p<.001. Rel status = Relationship status, Preoccu = Preoccupied, Prob focused = Problem focused, Emo focused = Emotion focused, Avoid coping = Avoidant coping, Psy distress = Psychological distress, [a]Male =0, female =1. [b]Single =0, Married =1

The correlation results indicated a significant relationship between attachment styles (secure, fearful, dismissing and preoccupied), coping strategies (problem focused, emotion focused and avoidant coping) and psychological distress (depression, anxiety and stress). Psychological distress was positively correlated with fearful and preoccupied attachment styles, and emotion-focused and avoidant coping. The three indicators of psychological distress (depression, anxiety, and stress) also demonstrated strong and positive associations with attachment styles and coping strategies. Depression was positively correlated with fearful and preoccupied attachment styles, and emotion-focused and avoidant coping. Anxiety was reported to have a significant positive association with the number of siblings, fearful and preoccupied attachment styles, and emotion-focused and avoidant coping. Stress emerged as a significant positive correlate of secure, fearful, and preoccupied attachment styles, and emotion-focused and avoidant coping. The results also suggested a positive correlation of problem-focused coping with secure and dismissing attachment styles. Emotion-focused coping emerged as the positive correlate of secure, fearful, and preoccupied attachment styles. Lastly, avoidant coping was negatively associated with gender and relationship status, indicating that men are more likely to use avoidant coping strategies as compared to women and married people are more likely to use avoidant coping strategies in response to stress as compared to people who are single.

Table 2

Independent Samples t Test for Gender Differences in Attachment Styles, Coping Strategies and Psychological Distress.

Logistic parameter	Male		Female		t (df)	ρ	Cohen's d
	M	SD	M	SD			
Secure	3.25	.53	3.32	.46	-.73(98)	.47	.15
Fearful	3.22	.75	3.47	.88	-1.49(98)	.14	.30
Dismissing	3.78	.66	3.59	.78	1.30(98)	.20	.26
Preoccupied	3.09	.59	3.12	.72	-.30(98)	.76	.06
Problem focused	2.80	.58	2.70	.54	.85(98)	.40	.18
Emotion focused	2.44	.45	2.44	.47	.00(98)	.99	0.1
Avoidant coping	2.18	.58	1.93	.49	2.20(98)	.03*	.46
Psychological distress	19.63	14.45	17.16	12.34	.91(87.74)	.36	.18
Depression	6.69	5.29	5.08	4.62	1.55(98)	.12	.32
Anxiety	5.90	4.89	5.42	4.52	.49(98)	.62	.10
Stress	7.03	5.11	6.66	4.43	.37(98)	.71	.07

Note. N=100 (Male=62, Female=38); *p<.05. **p<.01 ***p<.001.

An independent-samples t-test was conducted to assess the impact of gender on study variables, comparing men and women. The results revealed statistically significant differences and indicated more use of avoidant coping strategies in men as compared to women.

Table 3

Hierarchical Multiple Regression Analysis Predicting Psychological Distress, Depression, Anxiety, Stress from Attachment Styles and Coping Strategies

Variables	Psychological distress			Depression			Anxiety			Stress		
	B	*SE B*	*β*	*B*	*SE B*	*β*	*B*	*SE B*	*β*	*B*	*SE B*	*β*
Step 1												
Constant	-22.07*	1.37		-6.71	4.03		-5.84	3.64		-9.52	3.58	
Secure	2.11	2.76	.08	.53	1.07	.05	.51	.97	.05	1.08	.95	.11
Fearful	2.99	1.90	.18	.53	.74	.08	1.25	.68	.21	1.21	.65	.20
Dismissing	.80	2.15	.04	.64	.83	.09	-.20	.75	-.03	.37	.74	.05
Preoccupied	6.75	2.24	.32**	2.24	.87	.28*	2.1	.79	.28**	2.42	.77	.32**
R^2	.20			.13			.18			.24		
ΔR^2	.20***			.13**			.18***			.24***		
Step 2												
Constant	-28.58**	9.22		-8.97	3.64		-7.9*	3.25		-11.72**	3.41	
Secure	1.56	2.54	.06	.32	1.00	.03	.44	.89	.05	.80	.94	.08
Fearful	.98	1.64	.06	-.21	.65	-.03	.55	.58	.09	.64	.61	.11
Dismissing	1.98	1.88	.10	1.15	.74	.16	-.14	.66	.02	.69	.70	.10
Preoccupied	2.80	2.01	.13	.80	.80	.10	.70	.71	.09	1.29	.74	.17
Problem focused	-8.08	2.50	-.34**	-3.36	.99	-.38**	-2.69	.88	-.32**	-2.03	.92	-.24*
Emotion focused	8.90	2.56	.36**	4.47	1.50	.40**	3.22	1.34	.31*	3.21	1.40	.30*
Avoidant coping	1.90	3.79	.36**	3.04	1.01	.33**	3.44	.90	.41***	2.41	.95	.28*
R^2	.44			.37			.42			.39		
ΔR^2	.24***			.24***			.24***			.15***		

Note. *ρ<.05, **ρ<.01, ***ρ<.001

A hierarchical multiple regression analysis was conducted to identify the predictors of psychological distress. The findings revealed that all three coping strategies significantly predicted psychological distress (depression, anxiety, and stress). In relation to psychological distress, problem-focused coping (β=.34) was negatively predicted, while avoidant coping (β=.36) and emotion-focused coping (β=.36) both positively predicted psychological distress. Likewise, problem-focused coping (β=.38**) emerged as a negative predictor while avoidant coping (β=.40, ρ=.004) and emotion focused coping (β=.33, ρ=.003) both emerged as positive predictor negative predictor while avoidant coping (β=.40, ρ=.004) and emotion-focused coping (β=.33, ρ=.003) both emerged as positive predictors of depression. Problem-focused coping (β=.28) negatively predicted anxiety, while number of siblings, avoidant coping (β=.34), and emotion-focused coping (β=.31) both positively predicted anxiety. Problem-focused coping (β=.24) emerged as the negative predictor and avoidant coping (β=.28) and emotion-focused coping (β=.30) as the positive predictors of stress. The R^2 value of .44 for psychological distress indicated that the predictors explained 44% of the variance in the outcome variable in the final model. For depression, the R^2 value of .37 indicated that the predictors accounted for 37% variance in the final model. For anxiety, the R^2 value of .42 revealed that 42% of variance is

explained by predictors in the final model. Likewise, the R^2 value of .44 for stress indicated that 44% of variance is accounted for by predictors in the final model.

Discussion

The current study aimed to investigate the relationship between attachment styles, coping strategies, and psychological distress among Pakistani students living abroad, as well as to explore gender differences and the predictive role of these psychological constructs. The findings reveal substantial support for the proposed hypotheses and are consistent with the existing theoretical frameworks and empirical literature on attachment theories and coping strategies. The results highlight that psychological distress among Pakistani students living abroad is deeply embedded in relational patterns (attachment styles) and cognitive- behavioral responses to stress (coping strategies), reinforcing the idea that mental health outcomes in cross-cultural contexts are multidimensional and interactional in nature. In line with the first hypothesis, the findings showed significant associations among coping strategies, psychological distress, and attachment styles. Specifically, fearful and preoccupied attachment styles showed strong positive relationships with psychological distress (Depression, anxiety, and stress). Findings are consistent with the work of Wei et al. (2005), who also stated that insecure attachment styles, particularly fearful and preoccupied orientations, are strongly linked with elevated psychological distress in young adults. Similarly, Kobak and Sceery (1988) demonstrated that individuals with insecure patterns exhibit higher levels of psychological vulnerability over time. The present findings further support Bowlby's attachment theory, which states that insecure attachment leads to maladaptive internal working patterns of the self and others, thereby increasing vulnerability to emotional dysregulation and distress (Bowlby, 1982).

Consistent with Cassidy & Shaver (2016), secure attachment was found to be associated with adaptive coping mechanisms, particularly problem-focused coping, whereas insecure attachment styles were linked with avoidant coping and emotion-focused strategies. Moreover, the positive association between avoidant and emotion-focused coping strategies with psychological distress aligns with Lazarus and Folkman (1984), who emphasized that maladaptive coping is associated with increased psychological strain when stressors are perceived as uncontrollable or overwhelming. Compas et al. (2001) and Aldwin et al. (2001) also stated that resilience in avoidant and emotion-focused coping strategies predicts higher psychological distress over time. In the context of Pakistani students living abroad, these findings suggest that maladaptive coping may intensify the psychological burden of acculturative stress, isolation, and academic pressure. The second hypothesis proposed that the attachment styles and coping strategies would significantly predict psychological distress. The findings indicate that insecure attachment styles (fearful and preoccupied) positively predict psychological distress. Findings are consistent with Collins et al. (2004), who found attachment insecurity significantly predicted psychological distress in highly stressful populations. This suggests that attachment-based vulnerabilities extend across diverse populations and contexts. The findings related to gender differences were partially supported. Findings revealed that male students reported significantly higher levels of avoidant coping compared to female students, while differences in overall psychological distress were also observed. These results are consistent with existing literature that males are more likely to engage in avoidant coping strategies due to socialization patterns that discourage emotional expression and help- seeking behaviors. Gender baaed differences were reported in coping strategies among Pakistani university students, where males tend to rely more on avoidant and disengagement strategies. From an attachment perspective, these differences may reflect culturally shaped emotional regulation strategies where males are less likely to seek emotional support and more likely to suppress or avoid stress-related emotions.

Overall, the findings strongly support the theory of attachment and the model of stress and coping. Attachment styles appear to shape individuals' internal emotional regulation systems, which in turn influence coping choices and

psychological outcomes. Secure attachment strengthens adaptive coping and resilience, while insecure attachment increases reliance on maladaptive coping mechanisms, thereby elevating psychological distress. The results also highlight the importance of considering cultural and contextual factors, particularly for Pakistani students studying abroad. Academic pressure and separation from a family support system may heighten the effects of insecure attachment styles and maladaptive coping strategies, thus making this population particularly susceptible to mental health challenges.

Conclusion

The current study adds to the existing literature by validating that attachment styles and coping strategies are important correlates and predictors of psychological distress among Pakistani students living abroad. These findings reinforce the theoretical assumptions of attachment and coping theories. This study also highlights gendered patterns in coping behavior. These results underscore the need for culturally sensitive psychological interventions aimed at enhancing secure attachment representations and promoting adaptive coping strategies among international student populations.

Limitations

The present study has several limitations.

- Limited generalizability is evident as the small sample size makes it difficult to generalize the findings to the entire population of Pakistani students living abroad, and diversity within this population might not be fully represented, leading to potential biases.
- There is a risk of selection bias where certain participants are overrepresented or underrepresented, which could skew the results and limit the validity of conclusions.
- The homogeneity of the sample further limits the findings as the sample might not represent the broader populations due to socio-economic, educational, or cultural differences.
- The study also reflects a lack of contextual information as cross-sectional designs do not provide in- depth insights or capture important nuances.

Implications

The study offers several implications across psychological, cultural and academic domains. In terms of implications for psychological well-being, the identification of patterns helps in recognizing prevalent attachment styles and coping strategies among Pakistani students living abroad, enabling tailored interventions such as culturally sensitive services and support groups. By emphasizing qualities that can be utilized to empower students to effectively manage problems, it also helps cultivate resilience. From a cultural standpoint, cultural sensitivity training can help universities and other institutions better comprehend various coping strategies and attachment styles while also strengthening cross-cultural understanding to build welcoming environments for international students.

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