





## Association of Alexithymia, Loneliness and Psychological Distress among University Students

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<b>Keywords:</b> Alexithymia, Loneliness, Psychological Distress	<b>ABSTRACT</b> <i>To explore the association between Alexithymia, loneliness, and psychological distress among university students. A total of 331 participants were taken from the different universities of Lahore, Punjab. The participants' ages ranged from 17 to 25 years old. The sample consisted of male (n=50.8%) and female (n=49.8%) The sample was taken using a convenience sampling technique. The following measures were used to assess the findings: Demographic form, Toronto Alexithymia Scale (TAS-20), Kessler Psychological Distress Scale, and Loneliness Scale. Findings indicate that alexithymia had a strong positive correlation with psychological suffering and loneliness and loneliness was significantly positively correlated with psychological distress. Furthermore, females exhibited higher levels of alexithymia, loneliness, and psychological suffering compared to males. It is concluded that lack of emotional insight and communication difficulties lead to challenges in forming and maintaining meaningful connections with others, resulting in feelings of loneliness.</i>
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## 1 Introduction

University life is a key milestone in the development of young adults, defined by increasing freedom, academic challenges, and social opportunities. (Hochberg & Konner,

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2020). University is a period of development from being a teenager to being mature. It is an era for them to seek out and accomplish their intelligence of individuality, and at the same time, to seek out and construct close, secure, and societal relationships with others (Sawyer, Azzopardi, Wickremarathne, & Patton, 2018). However, this period of transition is also accompanied by unique stressors and psychosocial challenges that may have an effect on students' mental health (Damon, Menon, & Bronk, 2019).

One psychological feature known as alexithymia is the inability to recognize, describe, and express one's feelings. Individuals with high levels of alexithymia often struggle to recognize and articulate their own emotional experiences, which can impede effective coping strategies and emotional regulation (Timoney, Holder, Timoney, & Holder, 2013). Previous research has connected alexithymia to a number of mental health conditions, such as anxiety, depression, and interpersonal challenges. Previous research has connected alexithymia to a number of mental health conditions, such as anxiety, depression, and interpersonal challenges. Alexithymia is connected with psychological, personal, and physical factors (Vaiouli & Panayiotou, 2021). Some of these factors are social isolation, anxiety, stress, dissatisfaction with life, burnout, addiction to the internet, poor parent relationships with children, physical and psychological diseases, and depression (Hobson, Brewer, Catmur, & Bird, 2019).

Alexithymia is called a disease under the term emotional disorder. Alexithymia, derived from the Greek origin of Alexi (Lack of words) and thymus (emotion) and demonstrates an incapability to express sentiments (Barth, 2016). Components of Alexithymia include incapability of representative thinking, lack of thoughts, emotional draftiness, objectively expressions, and opinions connected to outdoor actions. Inhabitants with Alexithymia take ordinary bodily disturbance as immense, physical indications of emotional encouragement as terrible illustrate emotional suffering throughout complaints of body and look upon to healing interference; they are also looking for treatment for physical indications (Krentzman, Higgins, Staller, & Klatt, 2015).

Loneliness is an ingredient of the state of humans that influences all ages. It is a personal negative sentiment linked to the deficient social relations experience of the person himself. The logic of loneliness is connected with a person's assessment of their whole stage of social communications and explains as a shortage between desired and actual quality and amount of social commitments (Ozonder Unal & Ordu, 2023). Loneliness can be a response to the lack of social associations that a person requires or although a person has the communal associations they are not cherished or fulfilling according to the requirements of that person or they are deficient in genuineness and sentiments in them (Smith, Gavey, Riddell, Kontari, & Victor, 2020). Loneliness is just the emotion of being cut off from the process of engaging with people, human beings are supposed to energetically connect and the world as they communicate. Lee and Ko (2018) described loneliness as a sentiment in which psychological needs and opportunities do not match with one's relationships. Hence, people may even experience loneliness when they are enclosed by people. People increase managing methods like watching more television, expenses their time indolently, steady, and eating more to avoid their loneliness (Kearns, Whitley, Tannahill, & Ellaway, 2015).

Lonely students are also experienced psychological distress and it encompasses a spectrum of emotional discomfort and mental anguish experienced by individuals in response to various stressors and challenges (Meltzer et al., 2013). It manifests as a range of symptoms, including but not limited to feelings of sadness, anxiety, hopelessness, and agitation, often accompanied by disturbances in sleep, appetite, and concentration. Psychological distress can arise from diverse sources, such as personal crises, interpersonal conflicts, academic or work-related pressures, and existential concerns. described as inferior self-esteem and inferior self-concepts (Child & Lawton, 2019). This inferior sense of personality includes unconstructive assessments of health, performance (Depression and loneliness), manifestation, and actions.

Psychological distress among university students can negatively impact academic performance, interpersonal relationships, and overall well-being, potentially leading to serious mental health challenges such as Alexithymia, psychological distress, and loneliness.

## 2 Methodology

In this Correlational research design, participants were taken from different private and government universities of Lahore through a convenience sampling technique. The number of participants was calculated through G-Power software and data was collected from 331 participants. The participants' age range was 17-25 years old (*Mean* = 21.1, *SD*= 1.54). Middle-class undergraduate university students were selected for this study. Participants who were non-students, part-time workers, individuals aged less 17 and above 25, and those with psychological or physical disabilities were excluded. Personal information (age, gender, birth order, family structure, socioeconomic position) was collected on the demographic form.

### 2.1 Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (Andrews & Slade, 2001)

K10 a self-administered questionnaire was developed by Kessler (2003). The scale has 10 items and is used to assess psychological distress based on anxiety and depression symptoms. The score range is 10-50. This scale is reported to be highly reliable with  $\alpha = .92$ .

### 2.2 The 20-item Toronto Alexithymia Scale

TAS-20 was developed created by Parker & Taylor (16) to assess alexithymia. The range of scores for this scale is 0-100. Score of 61 or above diagnose a person has alexithymia and a score of 51 or below indicated that a person has no alexithymia the score are measured with 5 point likert scale strongly disagree to strongly agree.

### 2.3 Loneliness scale (Russell, 1996)

It is utilized to evaluate how isolated and lonely a person feels. S ("I sometimes feel this way"), N ("I never feel this way"), O ("I often feel this way"), and R ("I rarely feel this way") are the ratings for the 20-item scale. Strongly dependable scale is suggested by the 94 coefficient alpha of.94 and reliability  $r = .73$ .

After obtaining permission from the institution, the researchers established a connection with the participants. In addition, the consent form that inquired about the student's willingness to participate in the research was distributed to them. Confidentiality and the opportunity to withdraw from the research if it made the participant feel uncomfortable were both topics that were covered in the consent form. Following the conclusion of the data-gathering process, the researchers conveyed their appreciation to every participant. The period covered by the research was from July 2023 to August 2023. After the data collection, both a descriptive statistic and an inferential statistic were computed. All of the analyses were performed using SPSS version 21.0.

## 3 Results

**Table 1: Frequency and percentage of Demographics (N=331)**

<i>Variables</i>	<i>F</i>
<b>Gender</b>	
Male	166(50.8%)
Female	165(49.8%)
<b>Age</b>	
17-20 years	199 (60)
21-25 years	132(40)
<b>Education</b>	
BS/Bsc/Msc	200(60.4)
Mphil/MS	85(25.7)

PHD	25(7.6)
Diploma/Short Course	21(6.3)
Birth Order	
1 <sup>st</sup> Born	132(40)
Mid Born	147(44)
Last Born	28(9)
Only Child	24(7)
Number of Siblings	
1	7(2.1)
2	43(13)
3	101(30.5)
4	163(49.2)
5	8(2.4)
6	8(2.4)
7	1(0.3)

First, psychometric characteristics and Cronbach's alpha reliability were calculated for Alexithymia, Loneliness, and Psychological Distress using participant data.

**Table 2: Psychometric Properties of Alexithymia, Loneliness and Psychological Distress. (N=331)**

Scales	No of Items	$\alpha$
AS	20	.94
UCLALS	20	.80
PD	10	.93

Note: AS, Alexithymia Scale; UCLALS, University of California Los Angeles Loneliness Scale; PD, Psychological Distress Scale.

Table 2 shows that the instruments' Cronbach's alphas were reliable and valid for the sample. Normality assumptions were checked with preliminary studies.

**Table 3: Relationship between Alexithymia, Loneliness and Psychological Distress (N=331)**

Variables	1	2	3
Alexithymia	1	.78**	.93**
Loneliness	-----		1
Psychological Distress	-----	-----	
			1

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$

As indicated in Table 3, Alexithymia and loneliness were positively connected with psychological discomfort and loneliness.

**Table 4: Linear Regression Analysis showing predictive values of variables of alexithymia (N=331)**

Variables	$\Delta R^2$	$\beta$	Significance
Loneliness	.61	1.30	.00
Psychological Distress	.86	1.53	.00

As shown in Table 4 loneliness and psychological distress were positive predictors of Alexithymia.

**Table 5: T-test Analysis to find out gender differences between Alexithymia, Loneliness and Psychological Distress (N=331)**

Variables	Male		Female		t	p	LL	UL	Cohen's d
	M	SD	M	SD					
Alexithymia	38.84	9.88	46.21	16.80	-4.86	.00	-10.34	-.38	.53
Loneliness	44.09	7.57	47.60	9.20	-3.79	.00	-5.33	-.69	.41
PD	19.71	6.08	24.23	10.11	-4.92	.00	-6.31	-.70	.54

As shown in Table 5 that there was significant difference between male and female in the level of Alexithymia, Loneliness and Psychological Distress of students.

#### 4 Discussion

The burden of social and economic development, political stability, consolidation and glorification of the future lies on the shoulders of youth (Sjöberg, Edberg, Rasmussen, & Beck, 2019) Alexithymia youth have trouble identifying, defining, and expressing their feelings. People with alexithymia struggle to express their psychological discomfort and seek treatment (Linda Barratt, Shaban, & Moyle, 2011). This may cause feelings of loneliness, misunderstanding, and negative effects (Dong, Chang, Wong, & Simon, 2012)

The result of the first hypothesis is consistent with research and research found a substantial association between alexithymia and loneliness (Li et al., 2021). For instance, individuals who struggle to identify or articulate their emotions may feel a heightened sense of social isolation, as they may find it challenging to connect with others on an emotional level. Similarly, those inclined toward externally oriented thinking patterns may prioritize superficial interactions over meaningful connections, contributing to feelings of loneliness and alienation (Liang & West, 2011). Psychological distress, personality disorders, eating disorders, substance abuse, alcoholism, depression, sexual dysfunction, anxiety disorders such as panic disorder and social phobia, and traumatic childhood experiences are associated with alexithymia.. (Zhang et al., 2023)

Furthermore, linear regression analysis revealed that loneliness and psychological distress was positive predictor of alexithymia. Studies show that three characteristics of alexithymia trouble detecting feeling, externally oriented thinking, and difficulty articulating feeling can predict loneliness meaningfully.(Frye-Cox & Hesse, 2013). The positive predictive relationship between loneliness and alexithymia suggests that individuals experiencing greater feelings of loneliness are more likely to exhibit difficulties in describing their emotions (Zhang et al., 2023).

Last but not least, the findings of the current research supported the hypothesis. Females found to be highly influenced from alexithymia, loneliness and psychological distress as compared to males. Some investigations showed alexithymia was more common in women (Levant, Hall, Williams, & Hasan, 2009).The prevalence of alexithymia was found to be 13.8% among males and 19.7% among females among high school students in Italy, and 7.7% among males and 20% among females among college students in the United Kingdom (Leweke, Leichsenring, Kruse, & Hermes, 2011). Alexithymia did not differ between men and women in other research (Joukamaa et al., 2007). Additionally, more research indicated that alexithymia was more common in men (Mattila, Salminen, Nummi, & Joukamaa, 2006).

#### 5 Conclusion

This study's primary goal was to investigate the connection between university students' psychological distress, loneliness, and alexithymia. In addition, gender differences were also explored in this study. The findings of this study have underscored the significant interplay between alexithymia, loneliness, and psychological distress among university students.

Alexithymia, characterized by difficulties in identifying and expressing emotions, emerged as a significant predictor of psychological distress, suggesting that impaired emotional processing may exacerbate feelings of anxiety and depression among students.

This study concluded that females were to be highly influenced by alexithymia, loneliness, and psychological distress as compared to males. Some investigations showed alexithymia was more common in women. The prevalence of alexithymia was found to be 13.8% among males and 19.7% among females. Moreover, the profound impact of loneliness on students' mental health highlighted the importance of addressing social connectedness and fostering supportive relationships within the university community.

In conclusion, it is suggested a significant correlation between alexithymia, psychological suffering, and loneliness, with females exhibiting higher levels of these constructs compared to males. These findings highlight the importance of gender-sensitive approaches in addressing emotional processing deficits and their implications for mental health. By addressing the interrelated challenges of alexithymia, loneliness, and psychological distress, an individual can create environments that foster resilience, connectedness, and flourishing among students in higher education.

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