



RESEARCH ARTICLE

PREDICTING PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTRESS AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS: THE ROLE OF RELIGIOSITY AND INTOLERANCE OF UNCERTAINTY

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Abstract

The aim of the present study was to examine the effect of Intolerance of uncertainty and religiosity on psychological distress among university students. Pre-established scales of Intolerance of uncertainty, religiosity and psychological distress were adapted from existing literature with slight modifications to fit into the context. A sample of 209 university students (mean age 25.6) participated in the research study. The data collected were subjected to descriptive analysis and multiple regression analysis using SPSS. The results revealed that Intolerance of uncertainty has a significant positive effect on psychological distress. In contrast, it was observed that religiosity exerts a significant negative effect on psychological distress. Moreover, results indicated a significant difference in psychological distress between male and female students.

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Introduction:-

Academic environments have been identified as highly demanding and challenging for the individual (Barbayannis et al., 2022; Eisenberg et al., 2009; Green et al., 2021). Aside from emphasising success and performance, attending universities marks a significant departure from colleges, where everything is much more structured and stable (Lawrence, n.d.). University students are expected to be more self-sufficient and independent, but they frequently face financial difficulties, separation from their social network, and difficulties in forming new relationships (Kurtovic, 2013; Liao & Wei, 2011; Yavuzaslan et al., 2016). Emerging adulthood is the stage of development that encompasses both adolescence and young adulthood and lasts from the ages of 18 to 29. It is a time of numerous psychological and psychosocial changes, which, when paired with the demands of college, exposes students to a significant amount of pressure (Arnett et al., 2014). Students who do not adjust well to this new environment, such as having unrealistic expectations and becoming preoccupied with their mistakes, are more likely to develop specific mental health issues (Adlaf et al., 2001; Doruk et al., 2015; Kurtovic, 2013). It is important to note that many psychological disorders manifest themselves by the age of 24, which coincides with the years spent in universities (Kessler et al., 2007; Pirbaglou et al., 2013; Verger et al., 2009). Blanco et al., (2008) report that nearly half of college students met DSM-IV criteria for at least one mental disorder in the previous year, with nearly 12% suffering from anxiety and 7% from depression. In addition, 95% of counselling centre directors reported a significant increase in students with mental health issues (Di Fronso et al., 2019; Gallagher et al., 2016). A recent study shows nearly one-third of university students exhibit anxiety and depression symptoms (Pirbaglou et al., 2013). Even though consistent evidence of increased levels of psychological distress among students has been reported in past research studies, minimal effort has been made to identify significant risk factors for developing psychological distress. Identifying significant predictors of psychological distress will help clinicians and

researchers develop effective treatment techniques. Therefore, the present study aims to examine the effect of Intolerance of uncertainty and religiosity on psychological distress among university students.

Intolerance of uncertainty and psychological distress

We live in a world of uncertainty where we are unsure of what is coming next. In most cases, uncertainty is unpleasant, and people vary in levels of tolerating this uncertainty. Many people are likely to feel uneasy in this state. Individuals who have difficulty tolerating uncertainty experience negative emotions (Anderson et al., 2019), interpret uncertain situations negatively (Lin & Scott, 2012), and engage in different behaviours in an attempt to control or avoid uncertainty (Freeston et al., 1994). Intolerance of Uncertainty plays an important role in the works of Dugas, Gagnon, Ladouceur, and Freestone (Dugas et al., 2004). Intolerance of uncertainty is a cross-diagnostic vulnerability factor underlying several psychopathologies, particularly anxiety disorders like GAD and health anxiety (Boelen et al., 2010; N. R. Carleton et al., 2012; McEvoy et al., 2019; Shihata et al., 2016; Yook et al., 2010). It is defined as an "individual's dispositional inability to endure the aversive response triggered by the perceived absence of the salient, key, or sufficient information and sustained by the associated perception of uncertainty." (R. N. Carleton, 2016) Uncertainty is expected and normal, and it exists at every stage and domain of life. It is possible to be uncertain about one's career, romantic partners, and future goals while still feeling in control. However, for some people, this can be highly overwhelming, leading to psychological distress.' (del-Valle et al., 2022; Graffeo et al., 2022; Liao & Wei, 2011) The American Psychological Association (APA) dictionary of psychology defines psychological distress. (Kyes, 2012) as "a set of painful mental and physical symptoms that are associated with normal fluctuations of mood in most people. It is thought to be what is assessed by many putative self-report measures of depression and anxiety." (Harvey & Bray, 1991), and "as symptoms of depression and anxiety" (Bhattacharyya et al., 2014). A similar definition was used by Arvidsdotter et al., (2015) referring to Psychological distress as "a state of emotional suffering associated with stressors and demands that are difficult to cope with in daily life" (p. 687). Because academic environments are frequently unstable and uncertain, they can be overwhelming and extremely stressful to some (Kurtovic, 2013; Yavuzaslan et al., 2016; You, 2010). It is obvious that IU can be a risk factor for the development of mental health problems in this population.

Religiosity and psychological distress:

Religiosity has been defined as the level of a person carrying out his religious rituals, which can be seen from the quality and quantity of what is commonly referred to as religiosity, which is one important variable that has a negative relationship with psychological distress. Previous research has revealed there is a significant negative relationship between religiosity and psychological distress. It is well established that Intolerance of uncertainty has a significant positive relationship with psychological distress. Individuals with a high level of religiosity tend to have more mental peace and adequate resources (Dunbar, n.d.; Grenier et al., 2005). Individuals with a high level of religiosity are more relaxed, do not feel lonely, and have a high level of psychological well-being (Ladouceur et al., 2000; Shanza et al., 2021). Religiosity is the state of being religious, as measured by an individual's knowledge, faith, beliefs, and devotion. It is a religious quality, piety, or devoutness. Furthermore, the term religiosity carries varying degrees of emotional charge depending on historical associations and attitudes. It has a positive relationship with life satisfaction, psychological well-being, and spirituality. Based on the above discussion and the results from past research studies, three possible hypotheses are proposed.

- H1: Intolerance of uncertainty has a significant positive effect on psychological distress
- H2: Religiosity has a significant negative effect on psychological distress
- H3: There is a significant difference in Intolerance of uncertainty, Religiosity and Psychological distress between males and females.

Methods:-

Participants and procedure

The present study is based on a sample of 209 university students, which consisted of 84 males and 125 females aged between 20-35. The participants were purposively recruited after obtaining informed consent from all participants. Self-report measures were used that took between 10-15 minutes to complete.

Measures used**Intolerance of uncertainty:**

IUS 12, developed by (R. N. Carleton et al., 2007), were used. The scale consists of 12 items rated on 5 points Likert scale ranging from not at all characteristic of me =1 to entirely characteristic of me =5. the Intolerance of uncertainty scale-12 has strong reliability.

Religiosity:

The Ok-Religious Attitude Scale (Islam) developed (Ok, 2016) scale consists of 8 items with two negative items and six positive items rated on 5 points Likert scale ranging from Not at all =1 to completely =5

Psychological distress:

Psychological distress was measured using Kessler's psychological distress scale-10, which consists of 10 items rated on 5 points Likert scale ranging from All of the time =5 to none of the time =1.

Data analysis:

A multistep approach was conducted to analyse the collected data. In order to establish reliability and validity, Cronbach's alpha values and inter-construct Correlation were examined. The descriptive analyses, which include the mean and Standard deviation of Intolerance of uncertainty, religiosity and psychological distress, were examined. To analyse the mean differences in Intolerance of uncertainty, religiosity and psychological distress with respect to gender, an independent t-test was conducted. Lastly, multiple linear regression analyses were conducted to examine the role of Intolerance of uncertainty and religiosity in predicting psychological distress.

Means, Standard deviations and the intercorrelations among all the under-study variables are reported in table 1.

Results revealed that intolerance of uncertainty was significantly and positively related with ($r = 0.466$, $p < 0.01$) psychological distress and negatively related with ($r = -0.168$, $p < 0.01$) religiosity activities. Religiosity activity was found to be significantly and negatively related with ($r = -0.316$, $p < 0.01$) psychological distress.

Table 1:- Reports the intercorrelation of under-study variables.

Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3
Intolerance of uncertainty	3.84	0.68	1		
Religious	4.76	1.26	-.168*	1	
Psychological distress	2.93	0.75	.466**	-.316**	1
** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).					
* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).					

Table 2:- Mean differences in Intolerance of uncertainty, Religious activities and psychological distress with respect to gender.

Variables	Gender	N	Mean	S.D	df	t-value	Sig
Intolerance of uncertainty	Male	84	3.79	0.73	207	- 0.876	.382
	Female	125	3.87	0.65			
Religion activities	Male	84	4.79	1.38	207	0.323	.747
	Female	125	4.74	1.17			
Psychological distress	Male	84	2.72	0.71	207	-3.355	.001
	Female	125	3.07	0.75			

The results of mean differences in Intolerance of uncertainty, religiosity and psychological distress with respect to gender are represented in table 2. The results revealed no significant differences in Intolerance of uncertainty ($t = -0.876$) and religiosity ($t = 0.323$) with respect to gender. Indicating that males and females Do not differ in Intolerance of uncertainty and religiosity. In contrast, results regarding the gender differences in psychological

distress ($t=-3.355$) were found to be significant at a 0.001 level. Indicating that males and females differ in their levels of psychological distress. Therefore, hypothesis H3: is partially accepted

Hypothesis	Causal Path	Beta coefficient	SE	t-value	sig.
H2	IOU $\rightarrow$ PD	.471	.067	7.059	<0.001**
H3	RB $\rightarrow$ PD	-.147	.036	-4.066	<0.001**

Note: SE= standard error, $p<0.01$, **, IOU: intolerance of uncertainty, RB: religious beliefs, PD: psychological distress.
Adjusted R^2 , 0.268, F, 39.096; R^2 , 0.275.

Table 3:- Summary of multiple regressions for Intolerance of uncertainty, Religious activities and psychological distress.

Table 3 reports the results of multiple regression analyses, with psychological distress as a dependent variable and Intolerance of uncertainty and religiosity as predictors. The results revealed that Intolerance of uncertainty and religiosity predicted psychological distress significantly and explained a total variance of 27% in psychological distress (Adjusted $R^2 = 0.268$, $R^2 = 0.275$, $F = 82.875$, $p < .01$). Moreover, results indicated that IOU played a more important significant role in psychological distress as compared to religiosity. Therefore, hypotheses H2 and H3 are accepted.

Discussion:-

The present study examined the effect of Intolerance of uncertainty and religiosity on psychological distress among university students. Results of the correlational analysis revealed that intolerance of uncertainty is positively and significantly related with psychological distress. In contrast, religiosity was inversely found to be related with psychological distress. These results are in line with the previous research conducted by (Jansen et al., 2010). Past research studies indicated that Uncertain events are a major cause for causing distress among individuals who are not able to tolerate uncertainty. They evaluate the outcome as negative and perceive it as a threat and thus resulting in anxiety, which reduces the psychological well-being of an individual and gives rise to psychological distress. Individuals with active participation in their religious activities are consistently found to be related with increased levels of well-being. It indicates that students with increased participation in their religious activities experience lower levels of psychological distress. For instance, a study conducted by Frankel and Hewitt (1994) found that students who participated in religious activities found to live a happier life on the university campus and were also found to be better able to deal with distress and argue that one of the reasons for these findings could be because of the social support they receive from their religious community.

One of the important findings from the present study was that Intolerance of uncertainty and religiosity was found to be significant predictors of psychological distress. The proposed model explained a total variance of 27% in psychological distress. Consistent with the previous research studies, increased levels of Intolerance of uncertainty and lower levels of religiosity were associated with increased levels of psychological distress (Adeyemo & Adeleye, 2008; Dunbar, n.d.; Schieman et al., 2006)

With regard to gender differences. The present study revealed no significant differences in Intolerance of uncertainty and religiosity. Indicating that males and females do not differ in the levels of Intolerance of uncertainty and religiosity. In Contrast, results indicated significant gender differences in psychological distress. Moreover, results indicated that females reflected higher levels of psychological distress as compared to males. These results are consistent with past research studies. A study conducted by Matud et al., (2015) revealed that females reported increased levels of psychological distress as compared to males. The study argues that these differences might be due to gender roles, as female students are usually restricted within their homes and have and have greater responsibilities which include house chores and limited exertion opportunities, as compared to male students.

Despite the significant contribution of the present study, there are a few limitations that should be further taken into consideration. The present study is cross-sectional in nature which limits the ability to infer a causal relationship. Longitudinal studies are needed to better understand the relationship among these variables over time. The present

study used self-report measures to collect the data from the participants. Even though all the measures were selected after evaluating their reliability and validity, self-report measures are prone to social desirability bias. Therefore, further researchers are recommended to use multiple measures to deal with the issue of social desirability.

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