

A Socio-Cultural Analysis of Student Stress at Bahria University: Campus Life and Coping Rituals

Sofia Shahid

Sophieshahid34@gmail.com

MS Scholar, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences at Bahria University, Islamabad, Pakistan

Corresponding Author: * Sofia Shahid Sophieshahid34@gmail.com

Received: 10-06-2025

Revised: 16-07-2025

Accepted: 25-07-2025

Published: 05-08-2025

ABSTRACT

The socio-cultural dimensions of stress among female students at Bahria University are the primary focus of this study, which examines how stress is not only experienced but also socially shaped, gendered, and ritualized. This research transcends psychological interpretations by utilizing an anthropological perspective to examine the emergence of stress in daily academic life, the silent management of stress, and the cultural significance of the coping mechanisms that students employ. The study collects rich, lived experiences that reflect the interplay between institutional culture, familial expectations, emotional suppression, and the quiet rituals of survival through in-depth narrative interviews. This research reframes stress as a socially constructed emotional experience that is rooted in cultural codes of fortitude, silence, and sacrifice, rather than as a personal failure. The paper advocates for the adoption of more culturally sensitive mental health strategies and acknowledges that students' coping mechanisms are acts of resilience, not frailty.

Keywords: Stress, coping rituals, anthropology, emotional labor, female students, Bahria University, socio-cultural analysis, narrative inquiry, higher education, and gendered pressure.

INTRODUCTION

Stress has evolved from an occasional emotional disturbance to a defining characteristic of student life, profoundly ingrained in the daily rhythms of university campuses. Although stress is frequently examined through psychological or clinical lenses, it is also a social and cultural phenomenon that is influenced by institutional pressures, familial expectations, gendered norms, and peer dynamics (Murali & Avudaiappan, 2024).

Stress is rarely an isolated mental event in the context of Pakistani universities, particularly among female students. Through culturally defined behaviors and coping rituals, it is lived, shared, concealed, and negotiated (Imran et al., 2025). At Bahria University, female students are not only expected to bear the academic burden that is expected of all students, but they also must navigate complex social demands. These demands include maintaining a "respectable" image, meeting parental ideals, performing emotional resilience, and balancing silence with survival (Maniram, 2022).

This research, which is grounded in an anthropological perspective, transcends the inquiry of whether students are stressed and instead inquires about the manner in which stress is perceived, interpreted, and managed in daily life. When students experience feelings of "breakdown," what actions do they take? In what ways do culture, gender, and institutional structures present their tension as a socially embedded struggle, rather than a personal flaw?

Statement of the Problem

Stress is still primarily perceived as an individual issue that can be resolved through self-control, motivation, or therapy, despite the increasing recognition of mental health issues in Pakistan's academic institutions (Kashif et al., 2024). Stress is seldom examined as a collective, gendered, and patterned experience that is influenced by social norms, emotional expectations, and campus culture.

This disparity is particularly apparent in the lives of female students, who frequently endure silently while simultaneously fulfilling both academic and familial obligations (Dr. Leenah Askaree et al., 2025). There is a scarcity of research that employs anthropological methodologies to capture these experiences, particularly through the perspectives of the students. This study aims to reframe stress as a socio-cultural condition, rather than a purely psychological state, by documenting their narratives and daily coping strategies.

Research Objectives

1. To investigate the socio-cultural sources of tension among female students at Bahria University
2. To investigate the impact of gender, social context, and institutional culture on the experience and expression of stress.
3. To investigate the emotional responses and coping rituals that students develop in response to stress.

Research Questions

1. What are the principal sources of stress among female students at Bahria University?
2. How do gender, social norms, and institutional expectations affect the tension that students experience?
3. What are the cultural significances of the coping rituals that students employ?

Significance of Study

This research is significant on numerous levels. Initially, it introduces an anthropological perspective to a subject that is frequently reduced to medical or psychological frameworks. The study reclaims stress as a lived experience, rather than a mere diagnosis, by prioritizing student voices. Secondly, it concentrates on female students, whose emotional labor is frequently concealed beneath the expectation to "remain resilient" and achieve excellence.

Third, the study demonstrates that these practices are not arbitrary, but rather are ingrained in cultural survival mechanisms by documenting rituals of coping, such as chai breaks, social withdrawal, group venting, silent tears, or humor. The results may provide educators and university policy-makers with guidance on how to create mental health initiatives that are more culturally responsive and gender-sensitive.

Scope and Limitations

The scope of this investigation is restricted to 17 female students at Bahria University who have disclosed that they have encountered tension during their academic careers. A fundamental screening question was employed to select these participants through purposive sampling. The research does not assert generalizability; rather, it concentrates on narrative-based, insightful perspectives on lived emotional

experiences. The results reflect the unique perspectives of the participants, while also providing a collective cultural narrative that is influenced by the social context, academic culture, and gender.

LITERATURE REVIEW

An Anthropological Perspective on Stress

Stress has been the subject of extensive research in the fields of psychology and medicine, where it is primarily defined in terms of chemical responses, mental health disorders, or behavioral outcomes. Nevertheless, stress is not merely regarded as an internal or biological response in the field of anthropology; rather, it is a culturally constructed and socially mediated experience. This perspective facilitates a more complex comprehension of stress in the context of certain cultural, institutional, and gendered contexts, such as university campuses in Pakistan (Rehmani et al., 2018).

The majority of the global literature on student stress concentrates on quantifiable outcomes, including academic performance, sleep deprivation, anxiety levels, and psychological exhaustion. These studies frequently portray students as isolated individuals who are able to manage stress through either resilience or dysfunction (Robotham & Julian, 2006). Nevertheless, anthropologists have contended that stress is not solely personal; it is intricately linked to the social structures in which students are immersed (Pohlman & Becker, 2006). Collective social expectations that contribute to what appears to be individual stress include the pressures of performing well, pleasing parents, maintaining a respectable image, and adhering to implicit gendered norms.

Stress among students is frequently intertwined with familial and cultural expectations of success in South Asia, and particularly in Pakistani society. The education of a female is not merely a personal journey; it serves as a representation of the family's reputation, moral value, and future stability. She must not only pass examinations but also maintain emotional composure, social discipline, and cultural suitability. These expectations generate invisible emotional labor, which is frequently internalized but not articulated, and contributes to chronic stress. The university is not merely a place of learning for many female students; it is also a place of negotiation, where they must reconcile their aspirations with societal control (Akhter & Iqbal, 2021).

The gendered dimensions of stress have been the subject of numerous studies in educational sociology. These studies have demonstrated that female students are more likely to internalize stress as personal weakness, underreport it, and avoid seeking assistance due to the stigma associated with emotional vulnerability (Jones, 1993). Unlike their male classmates, who may externalize stress through anger or avoidance, many female students cope through emotional suppression, isolation, or compliance. These are not merely psychological characteristics; they are culturally prescribed responses—rituals of being "strong women" or "good daughters"—that conceal underlying emotional distress (Gu, 2010).

The concept of coping rituals, which is a primary focus of this study, is derived from anthropological theories of symbolic behavior and affective expression (Broch & Kristiansen, 2014). Even informal rituals, such as sipping chai alone, sharing memes to alleviate tension, or weeping in the washroom, serve a purpose beyond mere catharsis. They provide transient relief within a constrained emotional field, carrying cultural significance. These rituals are indicative of the manner in which students adjust and respond to stress in a manner that is both familiar and silently resistant. In this context, coping is transformed into a display of cultural fluency—the ability to discern when to communicate, when to remain silent, when to joke, and when to withdraw.

Additionally, the manner in which tension is perceived and articulated is significantly influenced by

institutional culture. In academic environments that prioritize discipline, deadlines, and decorum, such as Bahria University, there is minimal opportunity for emotional vulnerability or candor. It is anticipated that the ideal pupil will be composed, resilient, and focused. Stress is only tolerated within this framework if it remains undetectable. Students who experience emotional exhaustion or breakdowns are frequently perceived as fragile or unstable. This perpetuates a culture of silence, in which students may be experiencing mental distress but are unable to articulate their feelings. Consequently, a significant number of individuals resort to covert coping mechanisms, including strategic avoidance, performative happiness, or private breakdowns (Wynaden et al., 2014).

The significance of emotional communities and peer networks in influencing the sharing and processing of stress is also underscored in anthropological literature. Informal alliances frequently evolve into environments of empathy and survival among university students. A ritualized emotional outlet is established by a trusted acquaintance, a group chat, or a casual "venting session" after class, which enables students to express what they are unable to express elsewhere (Oladeji et al., 2024). These shared moments are not merely arbitrary acts of bonding; they are rooted in cultural codes of trust, gender solidarity, and mutual caretaking. These relationships can serve as emotional safety nets for female students, particularly when institutional support systems are insufficient or nonexistent.

Furthermore, the manner in which tension is communicated and concealed has been significantly altered by the proliferation of digital culture. Social media platforms serve as both a catalyst and an instrument. On the one hand, the curated lives of others can exacerbate stress by inciting envy and comparison. Conversely, students employ parodies, stories, or anonymous confession pages to covertly express their emotional states. Digital rituals of resilience are established through humor, cynicism, and irony, which serve as a means of remaining visible without being exposed. Scholars refer to these online behaviors as the "performance of controlled vulnerability," which is a technique that involves maintaining a certain level of transparency to maintain social safety (Buglass et al., 2016).

Formal support systems are still scarce in the majority of Pakistani universities, despite the increasing awareness of student well-being. Counseling centers are frequently culturally stigmatized, underfunded, or absent. In such environments, students establish their own informal systems of emotional survival by utilizing cultural values, social intuition, and symbolic practices. Despite being frequently disregarded as trivial, these practices possess significant anthropological significance, as they demonstrate the manner in which stress is experienced, negotiated, and ritualized in daily life.

In conclusion, the current body of research on stress offers valuable anthropological and psychological insights; however, the anthropological perspective enables us to perceive stress as a culturally mediated, emotionally performed, and socially shaped experience. This study addresses a critical gap by concentrating on female students at Bahria University, capturing not only the emotional toll they endure but also the ways in which they adapt, persevere, and reclaim moments of emotional agency through everyday rituals.

METHODOLOGY

Design of the Research

This research is based on the anthropological tradition and employs a qualitative, ethnographic approach. The study's objective is to comprehend the manner in which stress is experienced, discussed, concealed, and managed in the context of daily student life, rather than to quantify the extent of stress among university students. The emphasis is not solely on the emotions that participants experience, but also on

the manner in which they interpret those emotions in terms of their social, cultural, and relational contexts.

An ethnographic perspective enables a comprehensive, multifaceted examination of the social implications, coping mechanisms, and affective experiences that are associated with stress. The research utilizes participant reflection and narrative interviews to allow participants to express their narratives in their own words, patterns, and silences. The objective is to co-create meaning through discourse, which is rooted in empathy and cultural sensitivity, rather than to extract data, by framing the research as a narrative inquiry.

Methodology for Sampling

A purposive sampling method was employed to identify participants who satisfied a particular inclusion criterion: having encountered stress during their academic tenure at Bahria University. This method was deliberately chosen to guarantee that the participants could provide narratives that were pertinent to the study's fundamental objectives and were replete with information.

Each of the seventeen female pupils in the sample is identified anonymously as Student 1 through Student 17, in order to maintain their confidentiality. Informally, these participants were identified through personal referrals, classroom discussions, and campus networks. To ascertain eligibility, a straightforward screening query was implemented: "Have you ever encountered stress during your tenure at Bahria University?" Participation was restricted to pupils who responded affirmatively.

This sampling method is in accordance with qualitative anthropological research, which aims to gain a profound understanding of the cultural and emotive patterns of a specific group, rather than to make statistical generalizations.

Participants

The participants who were chosen were all female students who were enrolled in a variety of departments at the Islamabad campus of Bahria University. Diverse social and academic contexts are represented by the group, which includes both day scholars and hostellers. Their ages varied from 19 to 25 years. Although their individual identities are safeguarded, each narrative provides a unique perspective on the lived experience of stress in a gendered and institutionalized environment.

Depending on the student's level of comfort, all interviews were conducted in private or quiet settings, such as vacant classrooms, library corners, hostels, or cafeteria spaces, one-on-one.

Techniques and Tools for Data Collection

Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were the primary method of data collection. The duration of each interview varied between 30 and 60 minutes, contingent upon the participant's availability and openness. In order to guarantee consistency, an open-ended interview guide was implemented, which simultaneously permitted participants to articulate their personal narratives, emotions, and experiences without restriction.

Interviews were conducted in either English or Urdu, depending on the student's inclination, and notes were manually recorded. In certain instances, participants shared spontaneous narratives or reflections outside of formal interviews, which were also documented with consent. The emotional nuance and contextual richness of their lives were captured through these informal conversations.

Ethical Considerations

The research process was characterized by a high level of ethical consideration, as the subject matter was highly sensitive. Participants were reminded of their right to withdraw at any time without explanation, and informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to each interview. Participants were explicitly informed that their real names would not be used in any aspect of the study, and no audio recordings were made to assure privacy. Rather, a consistent number (e.g., Student 1, Student 2) was designated to each student throughout the findings.

Additionally, precautions were implemented to prevent re-traumatization. Interview sessions were conducted in a casual, supportive, and conversational manner, and participants were not compelled to share profound emotional memories. The interview was either suspended or redirected if a participant became visibly uncomfortable or emotional, depending on their comfort level.

DATA ANALYSIS

Thematic analysis was employed to analyze the narratives that were collected, as it is an effective method for identifying patterns, metaphors, and symbolic meanings in qualitative data. The notes were evaluated on multiple occasions after all interviews were concluded, and recurring themes were identified.

Theme 1: The Repercussions of Expectations: Silent Pressure, Family, and Reputation

Stress is seldom exclusively academic in the lives of numerous female pupils at Bahria University. It is interwoven with the threads of cultural performance, personal sacrifice, and family duty. This theme encapsulates the relentless expectation to be not only successful, but also deserving of affection, investment, and approval, which is the source of invisible emotional burdens. In these narratives, the GPA that is depicted on paper is a representation of loyalty, morality, and value in the eyes of others. The following are six perspectives that reflect a shared emotional reality

Student 1

"I do not merely study for my own benefit." I pursue my studies in order to maintain my parents' tranquility. They have already made numerous sacrifices. Despite my exhaustion or burnout, I am unable to demonstrate it... It would be perceived as betrayal. "

Her words are weighty, imbued with a subtle sense of obligation. Studying here is not an act of ambition, but rather an act of emotional restitution. Fatigue is not a personal issue; it is a violation of familial gratitude. The tension is not derived from the syllabus, but rather from the moral contract that has been established between a daughter and her family's expectations.

Student 2

"My father consistently emphasizes, 'You are our investment.'" I am aware that he is joking; however, it is not a jest for me. I am unable to sleep for days when I fail even a quiz."

The economic lens that is frequently applied to the education of daughters is revealed by the metaphor of "investment," which generates high-pressure returns. After a quiz, she is unable to fall asleep due to the dread of emotional bankruptcy, which is a feeling of being unworthy of the privileges she has been granted. This is not a result of academic guilt.

Student 3

"I refrain from discussing stress with my family." "They believe that university life is relaxed." They accuse me of being insensitive if I express fatigue."

This reticence is cultural. In her household, the act of identifying exhaustion is considered impolite, while tension is considered disrespectful. This narrative demonstrates that emotional invalidation is not always audible; it is frequently concealed beneath the language of minimization and comparison.

Student 4

"Occasionally, I experience the sensation of being a soldier in another conflict. I am the weapon, and they are engaged in a struggle for family prestige."

The profundity of emotional alienation is revealed by this remarkable metaphor. She is being deployed in a battle that she did not choose, rather than researching for herself. The cause she represents obliterates her identity. In this context, stress is a consequence of symbolic warfare, rather than personal failure.

Student 5

"My mother weeps each time I receive a lower score." She is apprehensive about the opinions of others, not because of me. "That is the only thing that truly breaks my heart."

The burden of self-disappointment is replaced with collective humiliation, and academic results are transformed into public morality. The genuine tension is not failure; it is the imagined whispers of relatives and neighbors. This narrative illustrates the internalization of communal judgment, which transforms grades into destructive emotional weapons.

Student 6

"My family consistently advises me to achieve a high CGPA, and everything will be fine." I am under the impression that I am being promised a form of liberation that is perpetually just beyond my reach."

This is the deception of conditional freedom. Her family associates relief with performance, as if tranquility is acquired through academic achievement. This vague assurance induces an ongoing pursuit, a revolving finish line that never materializes. In this context, stress is not a transient obstacle; rather, it is a permanent state.

Anthropological Interpretation

A potent pattern is revealed in these six narratives: tension is not merely the result of exams or deadlines; it is culturally manufactured and emotionally inherited. Each pupil is residing in an emotional economy that is invisible to the naked eye, in which success is equivalent to love and failure to shame (Dr. Leenah Åskaree et al., 2025). The profound symbolic meanings associated with academic performance are revealed by the metaphor of "soldiers," "investments," and "freedom."

These narratives demonstrate that stress is socially coded, rather than solely internalized, from an anthropological perspective. It is gendered, as females are expected to be compliant, grateful, and high-performing without any protest. It is moralized, with emotional distress being interpreted as a sign of entitlement and fatigue as a sign of weakness. And it is ritualized—students are required to maintain silence, endure suffering gracefully, and conceal their injuries behind smiles and GPAs.

These narratives are not isolated instances; they are indicative of a more extensive cultural narrative in which daughters are both a source of pride and a source of encumbrance, and in which education is used as a means of demonstrating emotional worth (Gu, 2010). Stress is unavoidable in such a world, as it is not driven by the individual's identity, but by the burden they are expected to bear.

Theme 2: The Ritual of Appearing Okay and Campus Culture

Although universities are frequently portrayed as environments that foster development and exploration, they are also stages of performance for many female students, where emotions are edited, tears are postponed, and composure is mandatory. Stress is anticipated to be concealed beneath the veneer of punctual attendance, tidy notes, and polite pleasantries within Bahria University's formal structure and implicit norms. This theme illustrates the process by which students establish emotional concealment routines, creating external images that frequently contradict their internal realities.

Student 7

"I weep in the bathroom. Never participated in a program. Never in the presence of any individual. I put cosmetics and exit the room as if nothing had transpired."

This ceremony is profoundly symbolic. The bathroom is transformed into a sacred, concealed location, a temple for emotional discharge. The act of repairing one's makeup is not merely cosmetic; it is a reconstruction of one's public self, a means of reentering the social world as if suffering had never existed. This is a classic illustration of emotional labor—invisible, taxing, and anticipated.

Student 8

"There is an ongoing competition in this environment—not for academic achievement, but for the ability to project the most forceful demeanor." If you are beaming and laughing, you have triumphed, even if you are internally collapsing.

This observation demonstrates that social rewards are not based on the authenticity of strength, but rather on its execution. Emotional breakdown is transformed into a private indulgence, while visible suffering is transformed into a social failure. The competitive silence is not about the individual who experiences the least emotion; rather, it is about the individual who presents the most convincing facade.

Student 9

"Occasionally, I believe that individuals will only regard me as a serious individual if I never exhibit any signs of vulnerability." Therefore, despite the fact that I am experiencing difficulty breathing, I simply nod, respond with "I am fine," and proceed."

This is the internalization of the "strong girl" narrative, in which even panic is quietly absorbed. Her decision to maintain silence is not solely personal; it is cultural. In her universe, being taken seriously necessitates being emotionally untouchable, even if it results in emotional suffocation.

Student 10

"We send memes about mental breakdowns, we joke about being depressed..." It is the sole method by which we can discuss the actual events without appearing overly dramatic.

In this context, humor is transformed into a survival ritual. Students translate unspeakable truths into socially acceptable language through memes and irony. This is indicative of what anthropologists refer to as controlled vulnerability, the capacity to articulate pain without completely exposing it. It is emotional honesty that is encoded in humor.

Student 11

"There is this apprehension that individuals will begin to treat you differently if you disclose that you are experiencing difficulties." You will be branded as the "emotional one," and no one desires that title."

This apprehension regarding emotional labeling exposes a concealed culture of stigma. Academic credibility and social status are jeopardized by emotional visibility. Consequently, students acquire the ability to cultivate emotional neutrality, even if it necessitates becoming alienated from their own emotions.

Student 12

"I have become so adept at feigning well-being that I occasionally lose sight of the sensation of being okay."

Perhaps the most haunting realization of all: the original ego has been erased by this student's performance. Authenticity has been sabotaged by the perpetual pursuit of stability. This is not merely concealment; it is emotional erosion.

Anthropological Interpretation

This theme reveals a distressing reality: in campus culture, the appearance of fortitude is frequently prioritized over actual well-being, particularly for young women. Every student is an actor who is rehearsing the role of "put-together, ambitious, and emotionally stable" in the university, which is transformed into a performance hall (Pohlman & Becker, 2006). Their instruments including memes, sarcasm, silence, and restroom mirrors—are not trivial. They are culturally constructed coping mechanisms that are influenced by institutional expectations, stigma, and dread.

From an anthropological perspective, this is indicative of the concept of emotional performativity, in which wellness expressions are not spontaneous but rather socially orchestrated. These females are not merely managing their stress; they are also managing the way in which their stress is perceived by society, peers, and teachers.

Students' emotional masks are not fabrications; they are protective layers that form as a result of the pressure to be "ideal girls" in an environment that values perfection but penalizes vulnerability. In this performance, the cost is invisibility—the inability to be seen, to receive assistance, or to even recognize oneself.

Theme 3: Coping Rituals — Surviving Through Small Acts

Ritual is present in situations where duress is present. Stress is not merely a condition that must be endured by female students of Bahria University; it is an experience that necessitates constant, innovative coping mechanisms. These coping mechanisms may not appear lofty or dramatic. They are almost mundane, silent, and repetitive: sipping chai at the same bench, scrolling through memes, journaling late

at night, and listening to a playlist on repeat. However, their consistency is the source of their potency. This theme investigates the cultural, emotive, and symbolic significance of these rituals, which serve as delicate lifelines in a turbulent academic environment.

Student 13

"Whenever I am feeling overwhelmed, I purchase the same lemon soda from the same café." It does not resolve any issues; however, for those five minutes, I experience a sense of autonomy.

This action is not about the beverage; it is about reclaiming control in a world that appears to be in the midst of chaos. The ritual provides a sense of anchoring, predictability, and familiarity. From the perspective of anthropology, this is analogous to spiritual repetition in that it serves as a personalized grounding ritual.

Student 14

"Every evening, I listen to the same melancholy melody." It is as if my anguish is rendered with a soundtrack. I weep and fall asleep. That is my daily regimen. I experience a weighty feeling the following day if I neglect it.

This is the rhythmic expression of grief. The song serves as a ceremonial container for emotion, rather than merely providing ambiance. She permits herself to experience emotions, but only within the confines of that nocturnal track. Crying in this location is not a sign of breakdown; rather, it is a timed, regulated ritual that maintains her equilibrium.

Student 15

"I compose letters to myself in my diary." I compose as if I were my own closest confidant. Occasionally, I have the impression that someone else is concerned when I read them back.

In a culture that rarely tolerates emotional vulnerability, this ritual fosters self-compassion. She assumes the role of her own emotional caregiver. The diary is transformed into a private altar of empathy, a profoundly sacred experience in a context where external comprehension is scarce.

Student 16

"There is a single bench located in close proximity to the parking lot." I sit alone and consume Lays with Sprite. That is the method of my rehabilitation. I refrain from engaging in conversation with anyone. I do not even browse through my phone. The bench and I are the only ones present.

The simplicity is misleading. The act of sitting, consuming, and doing nothing becomes a form of resistance to the perpetual pressure to be "productive." She reclaims her body, time, and space in this silence. It is a ritual of tranquility in a world that is exceedingly agitated.

Student 17

"Even if there is no occasion, I don my most favored kameez every Friday." On that day, I speak more softly and walk more slowly. I survived you. It is my method of narrating the week.

This is a symbolic triumph that is performed as a ritual. Friday becomes more than a day; it is a victory parade, a sacred exit from the week's conflict, and the outfit serves as emotional armor. A silent anthem of resilience is embodied in her slow stride and soft speech.

Anthropological Interpretation

Although these coping mechanisms may appear mundane, they are imbued with profound cultural and emotional significance. In a casual sense, they are not "habits." They are personal mythologies, small yet potent actions that transform pain into manageable moments. In a society where formal mental health support is scarce and emotional expression is frequently evaluated, these rituals are transformed into private sacred practices that are profoundly human, sensory, and spiritual.

In the context of anthropology, these actions are consistent with the concept of micro-resistance, which refers to daily behaviors that are designed to maintain identity, reclaim agency, and assert control in oppressive or high-pressure environments. These students are not passive victims of stress; they are quiet ritual-makers, emotional alchemists who transform breakdown into rhythm, exhaustion into pause, and pandemonium into chosen silence.

Additionally, these narratives challenge the clinical perspective on stress management. Therapy is not always culturally acceptable or accessible. However, ritual is universal. These actions are not escape routes, regardless of whether they involve the comfort of lemon soda, a melody, a bench, or a Friday outfit. These maps are survival maps that the females have created and have been incorporated into the daily fabric of Bahria University.

CONCLUSIONS

The objective of this investigation was to investigate the socio-cultural aspects of stress in female students at Bahria University. This research shifted its focus from statistics, diagnoses, or generic notions of academic pressure to lived realities, documenting the emotional landscape of campus life through voices, silences, routines, and rituals.

The research not only revealed the causes of stress but also the profound symbolic and cultural significance that are associated with it, as evidenced by the narratives of seventeen anonymized students. A collective expression of survival under expectation, ritual under repression, and fortitude under silence, rather than a singular definition of stress, emerged.

This research enhances the broader anthropological comprehension of emotional life in institutional environments. It illustrates that stress is not merely a psychological phenomenon, but a cultural construct that is influenced by affective codes, symbolic expectations, and gender roles.

Female students are not merely "experiencing stress" from an anthropological perspective; they are also navigating moral contracts, performative norms, and emotional surveillance. Their coping mechanisms are not arbitrary; they are culturally informed, profoundly embodied, and symbolically rich rituals of resistance.

This paper also challenges the binary of "strong" and "weak" pupils. The narratives demonstrate that students who appear composed frequently have acquired the ability to ritualize their distress, rather than eradicating it. Emotional strength, in this context, is less about the absence of suffering and more about the mastery of its presentation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

These results should serve as a reminder to educators, counselors, and institutional leaders that emotional wellness is inextricably linked to cultural context. It is insufficient to provide a psychologist on campus if the environment stigmatizes emotional expression or punishes vulnerability. A more compassionate academic culture is required, one that acknowledges emotional labor and allows for honesty, tenderness, and struggle.

The language and format of workshops, mental health awareness campaigns, and peer-led support spaces must be tailored to the cultural comfort zones of the participants. While not every student will enter a counseling office, a significant number will disclose their emotions during a group discussion or informal session if the atmosphere is emotionally literate and non-judgmental.

Additionally, institutions must reject the myth of the "ideal student," who is consistently punctual, emotionally secure, and focused. Real students weep in restrooms, break down in silence, and maintain their composure with lemon soda, memes, and Friday ensembles. Their narratives are legitimate. Their methodologies are intelligent. Resistance is embodied in their rituals.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Akhter, F., & Iqbal, S. (2021). Student's performance and academic stress: a study of higher education institution of Pakistan. *Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, 60(1), 63–79. <https://doi.org/10.46568/jssh.v60i1.483>
- Broch, T. B., & Kristiansen, E. (2014). "The margin for error": Ritual coping with cultural pressures. *Scandinavian Journal of Medicine & Science in Sports*, 24(5), 837–845. <https://doi.org/10.1111/sms.12077>
- Buglass, S. L., Binder, J. F., Betts, L. R., & Underwood, J. D. M. (2016). When 'friends' collide: Social heterogeneity and user vulnerability on social network sites. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 54, 62–72. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2015.07.039>
- Dr. Leenah Āskaree, Javeriya, & Zumra Zafar. (2025). Balancing Books and Brooms: Gender Disparities in Household Chores and Their Impact on Academic Stress. *Indus Journal of Social Sciences*, 3(2), 400–416. <https://doi.org/10.59075/ijss.v3i2.1253>
- Gu, C.-J. (2010). Culture, emotional transnationalism and mental distress: Family relations and well-being among Taiwanese immigrant women. *Gender, Place & Culture*, 17(6), 687–704. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2010.517020>
- Imran, M., Sultan, A., Imran, A., & Iqbal, M. (2025). The Impact of Academic Stress on the Mental Health and Well-Being of Higher Education's Female Students. *Research Journal for Social Affairs*, 3(1), 317–325. <https://doi.org/10.71317/RJSA.003.01.0088>
- Jones, R. W. (1993). Gender-Specific Differences in the Perceived Antecedents of Academic Stress. *Psychological Reports*, 72(3), 739–743. <https://doi.org/10.2466/pr0.1993.72.3.739>
- Kashif, M. F., Tabassum, R., & Bibi, S. (2024). Effects of academic stress on mental health issues among university students. *Journal of Social Sciences Development*, 3(2), 170–182. <https://doi.org/10.53664/JSSD/03-02-2024-14-170-182>

- Maniram, R. (2022). Exploring the resilience and epistemic access of first-year female students in higher education. *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies*, 78(2).
<https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v78i2.7803>
- Murali, R., & Avudaiappan, V. (2024). Unveiling the invisible struggles: Exploring student perspectives on mental health in universities. *IEEE Potentials*, 43(3), 31–35.
<https://doi.org/10.1109/MPOT.2024.3486902>
- Oladeji, K., Wang, T., Yang, D., & Bruckman, A. (2024). *Understanding #vent Channels on Discord* (Version 1). arXiv. <https://doi.org/10.48550/ARXIV.2409.19166>
- Pohlman, B., & Becker, G. (2006). “Stress Knocks Hard on Your Immune System”: Asthma and the Discourse on Stress. *Medical Anthropology*, 25(3), 265–295.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/01459740600860063>
- Rehmani, N., Khan, Q.-A., & Fatima, S. S. (2018). Stress, Anxiety and Depression in students of a private medical school in Karachi, Pakistan. *Pakistan Journal of Medical Sciences*, 34(3).
<https://doi.org/10.12669/pjms.343.14664>
- Robotham, D., & Julian, C. (2006). Stress and the higher education student: A critical review of the literature. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 30(2), 107–117.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/03098770600617513>
- Wynaden, D., McAllister, M., Tohotoa, J., Al Omari, O., Heslop, K., Duggan, R., Murray, S., Happell, B., & Byrne, L. (2014). The Silence of Mental Health Issues Within University Environments: A Quantitative Study. *Archives of Psychiatric Nursing*, 28(5), 339–344.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.apnu.2014.08.003>