Coping Styles to Overcome Mental Health Issues among Punjabi Students: A Thematic Study

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Abstract

This qualitative research explores how coping styles are used to overcome mental health issues among Punjabi students. The data was collected through semi-structured interviews from Faisalabad, Pakistan. Using a convenient sampling technique sixteen male and female students are taken equal in numbers. The data was evaluated by using thematic analysis. Three main themes i.e. emotion-focused approach, problem-focused approach, and cognitive approach are exposed in this research. Findings revealed that 80% of Punjabi students used an emotion-focused approach. Further, the male gender is more influenced by problem-focused rather than females. Our research could not find different socio-economic statuses influenced by coping styles because there was only one person who belonged to the upper class. Future, research can be conducted in broader and multiple contexts and mixed-method approaches can be utilized for further exploration of the problem.

Keywords: Coping Style, Mental Health, Punjabi Students, Problem-Fcused, Emotion Focused

Introduction

Punjabi students face many obstacles that can affect their mental health issues. They undergo pressure to perform well academically due to financial limitations and also are feared by cultural and familial expectations. Student frequently finds it difficult to manage properly their mental health in these challenges (Zhuo et al., 2021). The COVID-19 epidemic had a major effect on college students' mental health issues e.g. stress, anxiety, and depression. These are developed as a result of social isolation, academic pressure, and uncertainty (Hamza et al., 2021). To minimize these consequences, coping styles behavioral and cognitive techniques to regulate stress, are essential. Furthermore, coping efficiency and mental health outcomes are significantly impacted by the availability of social support (Qui et al., 2020).

Mental health is made up of three key aspects: emotional, social, and psychological. Emotional well-being maintains positive relationships, self-awareness, and optimism. Social well-being focuses on how the person interacts with their community. Psychological well is how people manage their thoughts, behaviors, and feelings in everyday life. These three aspects create a balanced and healthy state of mind (Keyes et al., 2012). A healthy mental state is essential for achieving life satisfaction. It allows a person to handle life problems such as relationship

reconciliation and stress management (Swami et al., 2021). Mental health issues refer to psychological conditions characterized by significant emotional, cognitive, or behavioral difficulties that impair daily functioning, social relationships, and overall well-being.

In coping style, people face stress in their life and they overcome their stress differently. A conscious effort to solve a personal or interpersonal issue is a help to overcome or lower the stress. The ideas and actions employed to deal with the demands of a stressful circumstance, both internal and external, are known as coping strategies(Keyes et al., 2012). Coping style refers to the specific strategies or approaches individuals use to manage stress, emotions, or challenging situations. It encompasses behavioral and cognitive efforts aimed at minimizing, tolerating, or managing internal or external stress demands. These strategies can be broadly categorized into problem-focused coping, emotional-focused coping, and avoidance coping (Lazarus & Folkman,1984). Problem-focused coping style involves the effort to modify the problem and typically includes efforts to solve the problem by evaluating the pros and cons of different options and implementing steps to solve the problem (Lazarus & Folkman,1984). Emotion-focused coping is usually defined as aiming to manage the emotional distress that is associated with the situation (Lazarus & Folakman,1984). The range of emotion-focused strategies is quite broad, such as denial, focusing, venting emotions, positive reinterpretation of events, and seeking out social support. Thus, it should not be surprising that the effectiveness of emotional-focused coping depends on a particular form of emotion-focused strategy (Caver et al., 1997).

Lazarus and Folkman (1984) established the transactional model of stress and coping that defines coping steps as active psychological as well as behavioral responses toward stress management. They established that people engage with two main methods to handle stressful situations which they term problem-focused and emotion-focused coping. Individuals who use problem-focused coping methods address stressors by seeking solutions whereas emotion-focused coping enables better management of stress-related emotions. Punjabi students in Pakistan tend to use emotion-focused coping approaches to handle their stress because of excessive school and family obligations by seeking help from relatives and using religious methods to manage their distress. The worldwide famous Punjabi culture presents many customs alongside beliefs social behaviors and core values that shape how people handle mental health together with coping strategies. Within Punjabi culture collectivism stands as one of the main characteristics because it emphasizes strong family and community relationships that establish supportive ties throughout the community. Spiritual activities hold essential value since they act as both comfort and inner strength during difficult circumstances. Within the cultural ethos, people learn to persevere so they can handle obstacles that appear in their path. Individuals in these cultural environments defer formal medical treatment of mental health issues to unofficial community networks because mental health problems remain stigmatized. Medical providers must fully grasp these cultural factors if they want to deliver mental health services that match this population.

The existing research about mental health coping among Punjabi students shows weak findings while society stresses the need for cultural awareness through mental health coping exploration (Sue, 2009). The analysis intends to produce information useful for creating mental health support systems and appropriate treatment methods that respect culture. Understanding culturally distinctive coping approaches requires complete knowledge to determine their effectiveness as mental health condition management methods (Ghosh & Choudhuri, 2021). The Punjabi student population faces multiple stressors including familial demands in combination with education-related stressors while they also experience social resistance to seeking mental health care within their cultural context. Such difficulties exist in our societies because family relationships together with social expectations shape how we view mental health and cope with stress (Triandis, 1995). This research examined male/female undergraduate college students at Faisalabad's public sector

university in Punjab Pakistan to study different coping styles concerning mental health indicators. The researchers need to analyze which coping methods produce either positive or negative effects on mental fitness. This study investigates suitable methods for Punjabi students to handle mental health issues stemming from frequent stressful situations according to Kaur and Singh (2020).

Rationale for the Study
The rationale for this study lies in addressing the mental health challenges faced by Punjabi students, particularly in the context of academic pressure, cultural and familial expectations, and the stigma surrounding mental health. These factors often contribute to stress, anxiety, and depression, which are not adequately addressed within the cultural framework. By investigating coping strategies specific to Punjabi students, this study aims to fill the gap in existing research, offering valuable insights into culturally appropriate methods for managing mental health. Understanding these coping mechanisms will help develop tailored support systems and interventions, ensuring better mental health outcomes for this group.

Objectives of the Study
- To identify the coping style difference between males and females in mental health issues among Punjabi students.
- To identify the cultural and contextual factors influencing coping styles among Punjabi students.
- To identify the frequently used coping style in mental health issues among Punjabi students.

Research Question
How do coping styles influence the ability of Punjabi students to overcome mental health challenges?"

Literature Review
Sue (2009) explains that cultural background plays a vital role in determining valid coping approaches for dealing with mental health problems in particular cultural groups. The Punjabi collectivist culture teaches individuals to rely on family members as well as community groups for forming their coping strategies. Punjabi students normally ask their family members and community members for support instead of visiting therapists professionally. Students face discrimination against mental health care due to community stigma which stops them from receiving professional help through their healthcare system.According to Triandis (1995), collectivist societies prefer maintaining family and group harmony above other things when it comes to coping strategies. Punjabi students prioritize coping mechanisms that serve two objectives which include upholding family status in social relationships and maintaining social unity. Punjabi students handle academic and familial stressors while showing emotion-based coping strategies through family connections and spiritual wellness practices due to their cultural and social values.

According to Kaur and Singh (2020), the mental health problems experienced by Punjabi students across both India and Pakistan stem mainly from academic strain combined with economic constraints and cultural norms. The combination of these problems creates anxiety and depression and generates a feeling of helplessness in students. The authors present research evidence that indicates that students tend to rely on emotion-based coping strategies like prayer along with family support to manage their emotional distress. Interventions should be specially designed to match Punjabi community mindset patterns because Punjabi cultural traits demand unique treatment methods.

According to Zhou (2020), college students experienced worsened mental health from COVID-19 isolation and the resultant uncertainty which created additional anxiety and depression symptoms. The mental health problems among Punjabi students worsened because the pandemic erased their essential physical connections with family members. According to Zhou, it is essential for both emotional and problem-focused coping mechanisms to transform with environmental changes and virtual assistance programs need to be integrated into mental health interventions to counteract social isolation impacts. According to Liu's (2021) research social support networks act as a strong factor that enhances both mental health outcomes and coping effectiveness. Punjabi academic students heavily depend on family support yet remain under pressure from the expectations their family members place on them. Family support serves as an advantageous coping resource according to his findings yet Punjabi communities often fall short of professional mental health services that would help students properly manage their mental health conditions.

Gill (2020) demonstrates how specific cultural principles affect how people understand mental health problems and respond to them. The cultural values of spirituality along with perseverance characterize Punjabi society and guide their coping practices according to their research. Punjabi students use prayer and religious ritual practices as spiritual methods to deal with their stress. These strategies enable satisfaction but native psychological struggles require combination therapy implementing traditional practices with clinical treatment methods.

The model developed by Endler and Parker (1992) establishes three main categories of coping strategies avoidance-oriented task-oriented and emotion-oriented. People who use avoidance-oriented coping deny or withdraw from stressful situations but task-oriented people directly work to find solutions to problems. People who use emotion-oriented coping adopt techniques to manage their stress-related emotions. Students of Punjabi origin usually utilize emotion-oriented coping methods to handle academic together with social challenges by leveraging their family relationships religious traditions and social support network.

The complete state of mental health depends on maintaining emotional well-being and psychological health in addition to social contentment according to Keyes (2012). The well-being of Punjabi students consists of keeping good family and community connections for emotional resilience which in turn leads to social connections that form their supportive network. Academic and personal stress requires psychological well-being because it functions as an essential component of stress management. The framework presented by Keyes allows researchers to evaluate Punjabi student coping by investigating how their emotional social and psychological well-being components affect their mental health results.

Ghosh and Choudhuri (2021) highlight the requirement for mental health interventions that understand Punjabi student cultures. Mental health strategies need to take cultural values and community standards into consideration according to their research findings. Health stigma in combination with collectivist values leads Punjabi students to seek assistance from family and their local community instead of seeking professional therapy. The authors recommend mental health practitioners develop interventions with culturally suitable coping approaches to enhance Punjabi student mental health results. Kamran et al. (2023) examined parenting style effects on southern Punjab child behavior while Amna et al. (2024) analyzed social interaction as a mediator between parenting style and academic achievement in university students in Pakistan. Ali et al. (2024) observed how parenting practices determine coping behavior in single-parent children. An evaluation by Javaid et al. (2024) examined the religious coping and mental well-being of Muslim university students followed by their investigation into the effects of friendship circles on university students' perceptions, attitudes, behavior, and academic performances (Javaid et al., 2025).

Method

Participants and Sampling Techniques
It is qualitative research and data is collected using a semi-structured interview method. The study included Punjabi undergraduate students from Faisalabad aged between 19 and 24,16 students (8 male and 8 female) selected based on convenience sampling to participate in the research. This specific approach has been selected because we can get participants according to the requirements of the research.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria
The inclusion criteria for this study involved Punjabi undergraduate students from a public sector university in Faisalabad, aged between 19 to 24 years, who are self-identified as experiencing stress or mental health challenges. Participants were required to have the ability to communicate effectively in either Urdu or English and be willing to provide informed consent. Exclusion criteria included individuals outside the specified age group, those who were not Punjabi students, or individuals with a diagnosed mental illness under clinical treatment, to maintain focus on coping styles in a non-clinical population.

Data Analysis
Semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather in-depth insights into participants' experiences. Thematic analysis was carried out to identify the themes and subthemes from the interview responses.

Procedure
Participants were selected using convenience sampling, ensuring an equal representation of 8 males and 8 females. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in a private setting to maintain confidentiality and encourage candid responses. The interviews explored participants' coping styles and strategies to overcome mental health challenges, lasting approximately 25 to 30 minutes each. Audio recordings were obtained from participants with their consent and were transcribed verbatim for analysis. To ensure reliability, interviews were conducted consistently, focusing on pre-defined open-ended questions related to coping styles, cultural influences, and personal experiences. Thematic analysis by Braun and Clarke was used to identify key themes and sub-themes from the transcriptions. Ethical considerations were upheld throughout, including informed consent, anonymity, and the right to withdraw at any time.

Ethical Consideration
The study abided by the ethical considerations. Participants were fully informed about the goals of the study and their interviews were recorded after their consent. All identifiers were eliminated from the data, which was then safely preserved. Participants were liberal enough to request that their data be removed before analysis completion or withdrawn at any moment.

Findings
The findings of the thematic analysis revealed that Punjabi university students aged 19-24 predominantly use emotion-focused coping styles (80%) to manage mental health challenges. However, participants emphasized that problem-focused coping is essential for long-term resilience as it helps to address the root causes and develop effective solutions. Emotion-focused coping, on the other hand, was viewed as more suitable for short-term stress relief or managing immediate emotional discomfort. Gender differences were also observed, with males more likely to adopt problem-focused strategies while females leaned toward emotion-focused coping. Financial issues emerged as a significant contributor to mental health challenges, though findings on socioeconomic class impact were inconclusive due to limited upper-class representation. Key

sub-themes identified include cognitive approaches (positive or negative problem perception), problem-focused strategies (root cause identification and behavioral adaptation), and emotion-focused methods (family and peer support, emotional regulation, and self-control). The coding system (M1-M8 for males, F1-F8 for females) ensured clarity and highlighted gender-specific coping styles.

Table 1 Identified Theme of Coping Style to Overcome Mental Health in Punjabi Students

Themes	Sub-Themes	Description	Description
		Male Response	**Female Response**
Cognitive Approach	Positive or Negative approach	Most first positive then negative	Mostly Positive Few are negative
	Problem Perception	Life problems are the part of life	Why I am facing to many problems
	Cognitive style more Suitable	Problem-focused style is essential for the long term and an emotional style is more suitable for the short term.	Problem-focused style is essential for the long term and an emotional style is more suitable for the short term.
Problem Focused	Direct Involvement	Most are direct involve to solve their problem	Indirect involve to solve problem
	Root Cause	To get to know the roots cause	To get root cause
	Strategies	Problem-focused making strategies	Use strategies
	Behavioral Adaptions	Out of Situaton	Handle the situation
Emotion Focused	Family Support	Low level of need family support	More family support
	Peer and Social Support	50% used peer support	10% used peer support
	Transforming Emotions	Gym, outing, Mobile games Book reading Spend time with Friends, smoking Pray.	Reading books Painting, home Activity, see drama And movies, pray
	Self-Control	No self-control	High level of Self-control

Note. The findings reveal gender-based coping differences among Punjabi students aged 18-25. Males prefer problem-focused strategies for long-term solutions, while females rely on emotion-focused methods like family support and creative outlets for short-term relief. Gender roles and cultural norms influence these approaches, shaping how students manage mental health challenges.

Table 2 Gender-Based Differences in Coping Mechanisms among Punjabi University Students

Items	Men	Women
Cognitive Approach	Males perceive life problems as inherent and manageable, focusing on long-term strategies.	Females often feel overwhelmed by struggles but manage stress through emotional regulation.

Problem-Focused Coping	Males actively solve problems, address root causes, and develop strategies for resolution.	Females take an indirect approach, showing less active problem-solving behavior.
Emotion-Focused Coping	Males utilize outlets like gym, outings, games, and smoking to transform emotions.	Females rely on family, peer support, creative activities, and self-control for coping.

Note. The table highlights gender-based variations in coping styles, with males favoring problem-focused strategies and females leaning toward emotion-focused approaches, reflecting differing responses to stress influenced by cultural and social factors

Discussion

The research that served as a thematic analysis explored how Punjabi students adapt their behavior to handle their mental health distress. The research explores psychological health concerns in a diverse sociocultural environment thus offering complete information about university students balancing school work with family needs in their native society. The predominant collectivist practices of Punjabi culture determine how students handle their problems. This research explores the broader significance of our findings regarding existing mental health literature and their application toward improving coping style connections with mental issues.

The research study wanted to understand if Punjabi students display different coping styles according to their gender. Male students from the Punjabi population employ different methods than their female counterparts to handle their medical problems. The main coping approach for males focused on problem-solving elements that included stress-handling techniques and personal and academic problem resolution. These desires conform to the traditional Punjabi student approach which stresses solution-seeking behavior. The coping strategies of female students consisted mostly of emotional venting together with obtaining social support while also relying on their faith and their family connections. Female students in Punjabi culture can easily practice emotional expression and family network dependence because these practices are accepted as conventional gender standards in this cultural setting. Gender roles played an influential role in shaping coping preferences between male and female students. The cultural roles restrict the flexibility between both social groups. The data confirms existing studies that demonstrate males frequently opt for problem-solving solutions to manage stress through practical steps rather than females who typically choose emotional methods to control their feelings (Malik & Rain, 2023). Most studies on coping behaviors confirm that women excel at emotion-focused strategies although men successfully implement problem-focused approaches (Austenfeld et al., 2004).

The investigation determined how social elements and cultural aspects influenced students from the Punjabi demographics. One single upper-class student in our research group prevented us from verifying the presented findings since financial difficulties emerged as key mental health factors. The previous research demonstrates how socioeconomic status (SES) affects health outcomes through its examination of the Titanic disaster to show sustained socioeconomic influence on survival rates. Among survivors, the women from the first class demonstrated superior survival rates above women who were in second and third-class cabins. The observed pattern reveals that life and death results depend heavily on social position. The researchers emphasize that the relationship between SES and health observed at Titanic exists beyond this historical event. Better mental health regularly occurs among people with higher SES across different social environments. Statistics show that lower socioeconomic status generates higher psychiatric problems among individuals (Michael & David, 1999).

The research study investigated which coping mechanism Punjabi students prefer to manage their mental health issues as its third objective. Punjabi students primarily utilize emotional coping methods in their coping strategies according to the research outcomes. Students primarily implemented emotional-based support strategies through obtaining peer and family assistance and religious devotional methods. Research outcomes reveal that problem-focused techniques represent students' essential long-term coping approach since they enable a better understanding of issues alongside discovering proper solutions. An emotion-focused approach benefits students during short-term periods because it allows them to handle current emotional and stressful situations. The identified outcomes show that students can benefit in two ways from an emotion-focused style but it only provides short-term relief and lacks lasting solutions which work on underlying problems. The strategies were accepted by the culture and proved easy for people to reach. Research evidence supports the theory that emotion-focused methods help control brief emotional challenges yet they cannot resolve main psychological stressors or stop long-term emotional damage such as anxiety or depression symptoms. Endler and Parker (1992) reported similar dynamics in their research study.

Conclusion
The research investigated how university students in Punjab Pakistan utilize emotional alongside problem-focused coping approaches to deal with their mental health issues. The research demonstrates that coping styles operate along with socioeconomic variables to create mental health realities for Punjabi students. The research conducted a thematic analysis which showed university students in Punjab Pakistan use emotionally oriented approaches to cope with eighty percent frequency. Students seem to prefer emotion-focused strategies because these methods offer an instant solution for both stress and emotionally difficult situations. The study participants recognized family support together with peer group support and emotional transformation along with self-control practices as crucial elements to deal with short-term obstacles. Acute emotional distress received particular support through such coping methods which produced successful resilience outcomes. The participants acknowledged emotion-focused coping strategies' weaknesses since they do not solve enduring root problems. Problem-focused coping styles stood out as the crucial methods needed for enduring mental health progress. The research data showed male respondents used problem-focused strategies more often than females thus hinting at differences between genders when handling difficulties. The study results show that students face problems effectively adopting problem-focused approaches mainly because of insufficient guidance and resource availability. The cultural background of the students proved to be a dominant influence on mental health difficulties but the general application of these findings became restricted because most participants belonged to middle-class families. Many students reported financial stress which demonstrated its extensive negative effects on their mental health.

Limitations of the Study
The following are the limitations of this study.
- All participants are from Faisalabad, limiting the generalizability of findings to other cities or regions.
- The study assumes uniformity in coping styles among Punjabi students, potentially overlooking individual or subcultural differences.
- Conducting and analyzing structured interviews for qualitative data is time-intensive possibly leading to less in-depth analysis of each participant.
- The study focuses solely on understanding students, excluding insight from postgraduate students or those not pursuing higher education.
- The study may not account for contextual factors, such as family background. This may influence students' mental health and coping styles.
- In our research, there were only middle-class students.

- The study is based on a small sample of 16 students, which may not be representative of the larger population of Punjabi students.
- The study utilizes only two coping styles in our research: problem-focused and emotion-focused coping.

Suggestions
- Involved family members in mental health support and coping skills development considering the importance of family in Punjabi culture.
- Compare the coping style and mental health of Punjabi students with students from other cultures or regions.
- Increasing the sample size and including participants from diverse universities and cities would improve the study's generalizability.
- Gender-based studies could reveal how societal norms and expectations contribute to the development of distinct coping styles.
- Conduct a quantitative study to validate the findings and generalize the result to a large population.
- Use different coping styles to overcome mental health issues.
- Select the sample and population of study from various socioeconomic backgrounds to get a broader perspective.

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