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**RESEARCH PAPER**

## Perceived Emotional Neglect, Social Emotional Competence, and Psychological Distress in University Students

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**ABSTRACT**

The present study investigated the relationship among perceived emotional neglect, social-emotional competence, and psychological distress among university students in Pakistan. It also examined the mediating role of social-emotional competence in the association between perceived emotional neglect and psychological distress, along with gender-based differences. A quantitative cross-sectional research design was employed. The sample comprised 300 students selected through convenience sampling from public and private universities in Punjab and Sindh, Pakistan. Data were collected using the Emotional Neglect Scale, Social-Emotional Competence Scale, and Kessler Psychological Distress Scale. Pearson correlation analysis indicated a significant positive relationship between perceived emotional neglect and psychological distress, whereas significant negative relationships were found between perceived emotional neglect and social-emotional competence and between social-emotional competence and psychological distress. Regression analyses showed that perceived emotional neglect positively predicted psychological distress, while social-emotional competence negatively predicted it. Mediation analysis revealed partial mediation through social-emotional competence. No significant gender differences emerged. Findings highlight the importance of strengthening social-emotional competencies and mental health support services in Pakistani universities.

**KEYWORDS** Perceived Emotional Neglect, Social-Emotional Competence, Psychological Distress, University Students, Pakistan, Mediation

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**Introduction**

Psychological problems in universities are a major issue around the world, with large cross-national studies indicating that on average, between one-third and one-half of first year university students endorse at least one common mental disorder. The distress caused by these symptoms has been identified as depression, anxiety and stress and is linked to under performance in school and difficulties with social functioning and a high risk for long term psychiatric morbidity. In this context, the perceived emotional neglect (defined as chronically feeling neglected and not heard by their parents) is an emerging risk factor that can have a negative impact on students' sense of self-worth, attachment security, and coping with issues related to their university experiences (Auerbach et al., 2018).

In Pakistan, university students are facing alarming levels of mental health concerns. More than 25% of university students in Pakistan report having clinically relevant depressive symptoms. For students of universities in Pakistan, the mental health

support on campus is not sufficient, and the stigma related to seeking help is prominent. Recent studies report that the depressive symptoms of university students are related to the emotional abuse and neglect of the students, pointing to the family experiences that emerged into adult life. Conclusively, there are many limitations to emotional neglect and the mental health concerns of the students. The emotional and mental health needs of university students in Pakistan on the whole are poorly unaddressed (Shafique et al., 2025).

The identified gaps show the importance of a systematic exploration of the possible relationship between emotional neglect, social emotional competence, and psychological distress in Pakistani university students. A well-designed cross-sectional study will determine if social-emotional competence is an outcome of emotional neglect and will assist in the development of culturally relevant preventive and interventional measures in Pakistani universities (Khan et al., 2021).

### **Literature Review**

Research indicates that perceived emotional neglect (PEN) predicts psychological distress for young adults, primarily for university students, across multiple countries (Yang et al. 2025). For university students in China, PEN explained psychological distress due to lack of self-determination and an increase in emotional dysregulation, particularly in females (Yang et al. 2025). Similarly, PEN explained the association in Turkey between psychological well-being and emotional neglect in caregiving and the impact of neglect, with anxiety and depression entirely mediating the effect (Aydn & Kaya 2024). These findings are also consistent with the meta-analysis showing that psychological emotional maltreatment in childhood, including emotional neglect, leads to depression, anxiety, substance use, and suicidal ideation in adulthood across various countries (Xiao et al., 2023).

Recent studies conceptualize social emotional competence (SEC) as an integrated set of abilities that enable students to comprehend and regulate emotions, foster adaptive social relations, and take responsible decisions that bolster learning and well-being (Collie, 2022). Cross-sectional studies with university populations demonstrate that SEC is linked to emotional motivation, prosocial behavior, and emotional problems, indicating that students, confronted with SEC challenges, adopt maladaptive strategies in dealing with academic and social spheres (Collie, 2022).

Psychological distress experienced by university students is a growing concern for public health and is typically understood as a combination of overlapping symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress, which disrupt daily functioning and signal a higher level of mental disorder risk (Roy et al., 2025). Large cross-sectional and review studies show alarming rates of moderate to severe distress for university students worldwide, with many students reporting co-occurring anxiety and depression symptoms, rather than a single diagnosis (Nosè et al., 2025). The most recent editorial contributions to this topic have addressed how the burden of mental distress, experienced by university students, has continued or even increased in the period after the COVID-19 pandemic to reflect the pre-existing factors that have stressed the higher education system and the new factors that have resulted from social disruption and uncertainty (Ali et al., 2023; Husky et al., 2020).

The original neglect in childhood has been proven to be one of the greatest predictors of psychological distress in different groups of people. The perceived neglect

has been proven in the latest studies to negatively affect people's mental health and lead to numerous adversities. (Yang, 2025). The studies show the emotional neglect experiences positively correlate to depression and anxiety and the neglect experiences negatively correlate to well-being and social support (Kaur et al., 2024). Childhood emotional neglect poses a substantial developmental risk, severely impacting the ability to develop social-emotional skills throughout life (Yang, 2025). Emotional neglect in the early developmental stages results in the long-term deficits in emotional intelligence, social functioning, and adaptive social skills. Recent studies have shown that the lack of childhood emotional support is a predictor of empathic accuracy deficits within social inclusion and social exclusion situations (Burns et al., 2022).

The link between social-emotional competence and psychological distress has become an important area of study within educational psychology, and recent studies have shown that social-emotional competence is protective against negative mental health consequences among students. Recent longitudinal studies have found significant relationships between social-emotional competence and psychological distress among teenagers. In a sample of 452 adolescents aged 16 to 19, it was found that social-emotional competence was a negative predictor of psychological distress and that this relationship was fully mediated by peer relationships (Chen et al., 2025).

In Pakistan, university students demonstrate notable psychological distress, with Asif et al. (2020) reporting depression in 42-51% of the population and some samples with anxiety exceeding 88%. High rates of psychological distress contribute to long-term mental health concerns and functional issues in the university community, yet mental health services remain underdeveloped (Saleem et al. 2011). Perceived emotional neglect, defined as the chronic absence of parental emotional involvement, emerges as a developmental risk factor for university students, explaining insecure attachment and emotional regulation difficulties (Bosmans & Borelli, 2022).

Although Social Emotional Competence (SEC) has been established as a protective factor due to skills like self-control and relationship management (Collie, 2022; Zahid et al., 2024), to date, no studies in Pakistan have investigated whether SEC mediates or moderates the relationship between emotional neglect and distress among university students. This is an extremely important gap in both theory and practice, as knowing these processes would provide a basis for designing specific neglect-SEC-building interventions to lessen the impact of emotional neglect (Li et al., 2022).

### **Research Hypotheses:**

H1: There will be a significant correlation between perceived emotional neglect, social emotional competence, and psychological distress among university students.

H2: Social emotional competence will significantly mediate the relationship between perceived emotional neglect and psychological distress among university students.

H3: Social-emotional competence will significantly predict psychological distress among university students.

H4: Perceived emotional neglect will significantly predict psychological distress among university students.

H5: There will be significant group differences among perceived emotional neglect, social emotional competence, and psychological distress in terms of gender.

## **Material and Methods**

### **Research Design**

This study employed a cross-sectional quantitative research design. A cross-sectional design assesses exposure and outcome variables at a single point in time in a defined sample to estimate prevalence and examine associations between variables, which is appropriate for examining links among perceived emotional neglect, social-emotional competence, and psychological distress in university students (Setia, 2016).

### **Participants**

The target population consisted of young adults enrolled in degree programs at public and private universities in Faisalabad. In survey research, such a population is defined as all individuals who satisfy pre-specified inclusion and exclusion criteria and from whom a sample is drawn for statistical inference (Setia, 2016). The final sample size was 300 university students.

### **Inclusion Criteria**

- Were young adults (e.g., 18–26 years) enrolled in undergraduate or graduate programs at universities in Faisalabad
- Could read and understand Urdu and/or English.
- Had lived with at least one parent or primary caregiver during their first 16 years of life.
- Provided informed consent and agreed to complete all study measures.

### **Exclusion Criteria:**

- Less than or more than 18 to 26 age excluded.
- Had a major neurological or medical condition that could influence emotional regulation or overall psychological functioning.
- Reported current use of medication that substantially alters mood or irritability.
- We're unwilling or unable to complete the full questionnaire set.
- Submitted incomplete protocols or showed clearly inconsistent or random response patterns.

### **Research Procedure**

Following approval of the research synopsis and accompanying documents by the department, the necessary institutional permissions and ethics clearance were acquired. Participants were recruited through convenience sampling, primarily from classrooms and common areas at the participant universities in Faisalabad. Students who were eligible for the study were provided an overview of the study, including the aim, study design, risks and benefits, confidentiality, and voluntary participation. Students who provided consent were screened for study eligibility. A demographic form and the three-part questionnaire (Perceived Emotional Neglect Scale, Social Emotional Competence Scale, and Psychological Distress Scale) were administered in a private classroom. The estimated time of completion for the survey was 20–30 minutes.

Participation was voluntary and unpaid. Students were allowed to forgo any question and could withdraw from the study at any time.

### Statistical Analysis

The guidelines utilized to score all instruments were thoroughly implemented, and accompanying data were processed in IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 27). For data on demographic factors, perceived emotional neglect, social-emotional competence, and psychological distress, descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, and frequencies and percentage distributions) were computed. For the three primary constructs, Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients were determined. Multiple regression analyses were used to evaluate predicted outcomes. Emotional distress is assumed to increase as a result of perceived emotional neglect and social-emotional competence. Mediation analyses examined whether social-emotional competence mediates the relationship between perceived emotional neglect and psychological distress, using bootstrapped confidence intervals. For gender, family system, and socioeconomic status, independent-samples t-tests and one-way analyses of variance (ANOVAs) were used to assess group differences, as applicable, and in accordance with the correlation and regression techniques used in cross-sectional survey research (Faul et al., 2007).

### Results and Discussion

**Table 1**  
**Demographic Information of Participants (N = 300)**

Variables	Categories	f	%
Gender	Male	141	47.0%
	Female	159	53.0%
Age	18-21 years	186	62.0%
	22-25 years	81	27.0%
	26-30 years	33	11.0%
Education	FSC	67	22.3%
	BS	164	54.7%
	MPhil	65	21.7%
	PhD	4	1.3%
Family System	Joint	106	35.3%
	Nuclear	194	64.7%
Socioeconomic Status	Lower Class	12	4.0%
	Middle Class	240	80.0%
	Upper Class	48	16.0%
Residential Area	Urban	208	69.3%
	Rural	92	30.7%

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the 300 university students included in the study. The sample comprised slightly more females ( $n = 159, 53.0\%$ ) than males ( $n = 141, 47.0\%$ ). The majority of participants were within the 18-21 age group ( $n = 186, 62.0\%$ ), followed by the 22-25 age group ( $n = 81, 27.0\%$ ), and the 26-30 age group ( $n = 33, 11.0\%$ ). Regarding level of education, most participants were enrolled at the BS level ( $n = 164, 54.7\%$ ), followed by FSC ( $n = 67, 22.3\%$ ), MPhil ( $n = 65, 21.7\%$ ), and PhD ( $n = 4, 1.3\%$ ). The majority of participants lived in nuclear family systems ( $n = 194, 64.7\%$ ) and belonged to the middle socioeconomic class ( $n = 240, 80.0\%$ ). Most participants resided in urban areas ( $69.3\%$ ), with rural residents constituting the remaining  $30.7\%$  of the sample.

**Table 2**  
**Psychometric Properties of Scales**

Measures	N	Min	Max	Mean	SD	k	$\alpha$
ENS	300	0.00	72.00	12.12	11.70	24	.92
SEC	300	25.00	189.00	100.34	22.70	25	.87
KDS	300	10.00	50.00	25.69	9.58	10	.92

*Note.* ENS = Emotional Neglect Scale (Perceived Emotional Neglect); SEC = Social-Emotional Competence Scale; KDS = Kessler Distress Scale-10.

Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics and reliability coefficients of all three scales used in the study. All measures demonstrated excellent internal consistency. The Perceived Emotional Neglect Scale yielded the highest alpha coefficient ( $\alpha = .92$ ), followed by the Kessler Distress Scale-10 ( $\alpha = .92$ ) and the Social-Emotional Competence Scale ( $\alpha = .87$ ), all well exceeding the acceptable threshold of .70 (Nunnally, 1978). Mean scores indicate that participants reported comparatively low levels of perceived emotional neglect ( $M = 12.12$ ,  $SD = 11.70$ ), moderate-to-high levels of social-emotional competence ( $M = 100.34$ ,  $SD = 22.70$ ), and moderate levels of psychological distress ( $M = 25.69$ ,  $SD = 9.58$ ).

**Table 3**  
**Correlation Analysis among Perceived Emotional Neglect, Social-Emotional Competence, and Psychological Distress**

Measures	1	2	3
1. ENS	1		
2. SEC	-.378**	1	
3. KDS	.338**	-.212**	1

*Note.* \*\*Correlation is significant at the .01 level (2-tailed). ENS = Perceived Emotional Neglect Scale; SEC = Social-Emotional Competence Scale; KDS = Kessler Distress Scale- 10.

Pearson correlation analysis fully supported Hypothesis 1. Perceived emotional neglect was significantly and negatively correlated with social-emotional competence ( $r = -.37$ ,  $p < .01$ ), indicating that higher levels of perceived emotional neglect are associated with lower social-emotional competence. Perceived emotional neglect was also significantly and positively correlated with psychological distress ( $r = .33$ ,  $p < .01$ ), suggesting that university students who report greater emotional neglect also experience elevated levels of distress. Social-emotional competence was significantly and negatively correlated with psychological distress ( $r = -.21$ ,  $p < .01$ ), indicating that higher social-emotional competence is associated with lower levels of psychological distress. These findings collectively support the hypothesized significant interrelationship among all three study variables.

**Table 4**  
**Simple Regression Analysis: Perceived Emotional Neglect Predicting Psychological Distress**

Measures	b	SE	$\beta$	t	p
Constant	22.334	0.752	—	29.709	.000
ENS	0.277	0.045	.338	6.199	.000
$R^2$	.11				
$F(1, 298)$	38.42				

*Note.*  $p < .001$ , ENS Perceived Emotional Neglect Scale.

A simple regression analysis was conducted to examine whether perceived emotional neglect predicts psychological distress. The overall model was statistically

significant,  $F(1, 298) = 38.424, p < .001$ , explaining 11.4% of the variance in psychological distress ( $R^2 = .114$ ). Perceived emotional neglect emerged as a significant positive predictor of psychological distress ( $\beta = .33, p < .001$ ), indicating that higher levels of perceived emotional neglect are associated with greater psychological distress among university students. These results provide support for Hypothesis 2 regarding the predictive role of perceived emotional neglect.

**Table 5**  
**Simple Regression Analysis: Social-Emotional Competence Predicting Psychological Distress**

Measures	b	SE	$\beta$	t	p
Constant	34.660	2.458	–	14.102	.000
SEC	-0.089	0.024	-.212	-3.742	.000
$R^2$	.045				
$F(1, 298)$	13.99				

*Note.*  $p < .001$ , SEC = Social-Emotional Competence Scale.

A second simple regression analysis was conducted to examine the predictive role of social-emotional competence on psychological distress. The overall model was statistically significant,  $F(1, 298) = 13.999, p < .001$ , accounting for 4.5% of the variance in psychological distress ( $R^2 = .045$ ). Social-emotional competence emerged as a significant negative predictor of psychological distress ( $\beta = -.212, p < .001$ ), indicating that higher social-emotional competence is associated with lower levels of psychological distress among university students. These findings further support Hypothesis 2, confirming the independent predictive roles of both perceived emotional neglect and social-emotional competence on psychological distress.

**Table 6**  
**Gender Differences in Perceived Emotional Neglect, Social-Emotional Competence, and Psychological Distress**

Measures	Male (n=141)	Female (n=159)				95% CI	Cohen's d
	M (SD)	M (SD)	t	df	p	LL, UL	
ENS	12.67 (12.70)	11.64 (10.75)	0.75	275.88	.45	[-1.67, 3.72]	0.09
SEC	100.42 (22.63)	100.26 (22.84)	0.05	294.34	.95	[-5.02, 5.33]	0.01
KDS	25.15 (9.91)	26.17 (9.28)	-0.91	288.06	.36	[-3.21, 1.17]	-0.11

*Note.* ENS = Perceived Emotional Neglect Scale; SEC = Social-Emotional Competence Scale; KDS = Kessler Distress Scale- 10.

Independent samples t-tests were conducted to examine gender differences across all study variables, and the results did not support Hypothesis 3. No significant gender difference was observed in perceived emotional neglect ( $t = 0.757, p = .454, d = 0.09$ ), social-emotional competence ( $t = 0.059, p = .953, d = 0.01$ ), or psychological distress ( $t = -0.91, p = .360, d = -0.11$ ). Although females reported slightly higher mean levels of psychological distress ( $M = 26.17, SD = 9.28$ ) compared to males ( $M = 25.15, SD = 9.91$ ), this difference was not statistically significant. Similarly, male and female participants did not differ significantly in levels of perceived emotional neglect or social-emotional competence. All effect sizes were negligibly small, indicating that gender does not meaningfully differentiate the study variables in this university sample.

**Table 7**  
**Mediation Analysis: Social-Emotional Competence as Mediator between Perceived Emotional Neglect and Psychological Distress (Model 4)**

<b>Total Effect</b>					
Variables	Effect <i>b</i>	<i>p</i>	Boot SE	95% Boot CI	
				Boot LL	Boot UL
ENS → KDS	.28	< .001	.05	.18	.37
<b>Direct Effect</b>					
Variables	Effect <i>b</i>	<i>p</i>	Boot SE	95% Boot CI	
				LL	UL
ENS → SEC (Path a)	-.36	< .001	.06	-.47	-.25
SEC → KDS (Path b)	-.09	.002	.03	-.14	-.03
ENS → KDS (Direct)	.25	< .001	.05	.15	.34
<b>Indirect Effect</b>					
Mediator	Effect		Boot SE	95% Boot CI	
				LL	UL
Social-Emotional Competence (SEC)	.03		.01	.01	.06

*Note.* N = 300; Bootstrap samples = 5,000. X = Perceived Emotional Neglect (ENS); M = Social-Emotional Competence (SEC); Y = Psychological Distress (KDS). The indirect effect is significant as the 95% bootstrap confidence interval does not cross zero, indicating partial mediation.

The results indicate that perceived emotional neglect is positively associated with psychological distress, and this relationship is partially explained by social-emotional competence. The total effect of perceived emotional neglect on psychological distress was significant ( $b = .28, p < .001$ ). Path *a* demonstrated that higher perceived emotional neglect was associated with lower social-emotional competence ( $b = -.36, p < .001$ ), while Path *b* indicated that lower social-emotional competence predicted higher psychological distress ( $b = -.09, p = .002$ ). The indirect effect through social-emotional competence was significant (Effect = .03, 95% Boot CI [.01, .06]), and the direct effect of perceived emotional neglect on psychological distress remained significant ( $b = .25, p < .001$ ), indicating partial mediation. These findings partially support Hypothesis 4.

## Discussion

All three measurement tools displayed considerable internal consistency in the present sample, with the Cronbach's alpha values of all scales surpassing the minimum desired benchmark, demonstrating how well the instruments measured internal consistency in this sample from a Pakistani university. The instruments measured the constructs with a satisfactory level of reliability across the data collection process. With respect to their perceived emotional neglect, social emotional competence, and psychological distress, the participants reported comparatively low, moderate-to-high, and moderate levels, respectively. The emotional neglect scores might reflect the safeguarding influence of the Pakistani cultural context, characterized by extended family cohesion and collectivist family care, in which strong extended family connections tend to buffer the emotional distance of parents during the later stages of childhood into early adulthood (Zahra & Saleem, 2022).

The Pearson correlation analysis fully supported the first hypothesis by showing a significant positive correlation between emotional neglect and psychological distress. This means university students who had parents that emotionally neglected them exhibited a greater degree of psychological distress from depression and anxiety to stress-related distress. From a theoretical perspective, this association aligns with attachment theory, which states that consistent emotional unavailability from caregivers

causes disruption to positive self-esteem as well as to an individual's ability to regulate their emotions. All of these leave individuals vulnerable. This vulnerability, coupled with the elite level of social and academic challenges of university, causes distress, as illustrated through the psychological distress the students express. This positive correlation demonstrates the psychological impact of emotional neglect that extends from the footprint of childhood and stretches into the duration of emerging adulthood (Bosmans & Borelli, 2022; Yang et al., 2025). Emotional neglect of any degree has the possibility of inflicting psychological damage. A study in China of psychological distress completed by university students found that emotional neglect in childhood caused a heightened level of psychological distress within the subjects. This was due in part to diminished self-regulation and excessive emotional dysregulation. The study also found that the phenomenon affected females to a greater extent. A similar study conducted in Turkey found a direct inverse relationship between emotional neglect of the subjects and psychological well-being. The study found that the relationship was wholly due to the subjects suffering from anxiety and/or depression. This phenomenon has been found to exist in many other cultural settings. A meta-analysis of psychological child maltreatment found a strong correlation to adult depression and anxiety and self-destructive behavior, including suicidal ideation and substance abuse. This describes the neglect that victims endure during their formative years and the repercussions that result as they transition to a university setting later in life (Aydın & Kaya, 2024).

## **Conclusion**

Current research is an integrated empirical study of perceived emotional neglect and social-emotional competence and psychological distress of University students of Pakistan for the first time. The results support the idea that a child's feeling of emotional neglect is a key factor in psychological distress and that social-emotional competence acts as a mediator and protective factor for this relationship. There was no difference in risks between the sexes, highlighting the shared risk across groups in this context. The results of the present study add to the existing scientific evidence for the importance of providing trauma-informed counselling in HEIs, SEL programs, and culturally responsive mental health policies in Pakistan. Additional research, both longitudinal and experimental, is needed to establish causal pathways and effective interventions that will provide support for the developmental origins of psychological distress in this population.

## **Recommendations**

Future studies would benefit from using a longitudinal design to determine time-order and direction of observed relationships. There is a need to examine other mediators like emotion dysregulation, insecure attachment and self-compassion in the studies to build a comprehensive mechanistic model. To enhance generalizability, extension sampling should encompass students from rural areas, students in professional programs, and students from under-represented provinces. Randomized Controlled Trials of the effectiveness of culturally adapted SEL interventions with incorporation of Islamic and Pakistani cultural values in enhancing student competence levels to reduce student distress in students having backgrounds of neglect require great need. Qualitative inquiry, within mixed methods designs, would help to elucidate culturally-specific expressions of emotional neglect and competence. A mandate for mental health screening, adequate mental health counseling support and integration of social-emotional learning within the university's framework should be in place at the policy level.

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