

Exploration of Stigma Around Men's Mental Health: Insights from University Students in Pakistan



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Abstract: *At the core of universities in Pakistan, a troubling crisis unfolds: the stigmatization of men's mental health, undermining the well-being of male students across the country, leaving many to suffer in silence. The research aimed to explore and identify the stigma, manifested in the form of various negative stereotypes, taboos, and prejudices, directed towards men suffering from mental health problems. A survey method of research was conducted among male students from 22 different universities in 11 cities across Pakistan, in order to explore their experiences of mental health stigmatization. A total of 95 students, aged eighteen and above, took part in the survey. The findings from the survey showed that a substantial majority of male students reported witnessing or experiencing stigma related to men's mental health. The results demonstrated that stigma personifies men experiencing mental health concerns as weak, vulnerable, or shameful, obscuring their struggles under a shadow of misconception. The findings further shed light on how stigma creates barriers that deter men from seeking help for issues related to mental health, due to the sustained fear of facing judgment or shame. Consequently, a damaging cycle of silence and stigma takes root, reinforcing negative beliefs surrounding men's mental health concerns.*

Keywords: Mental health stigma, Men's mental health, Stigma, University students, Pakistan.

Introduction

The cultural landscape of various societies, such as Pakistan, dictates that masculinity embodies strength, toughness, and emotional endurance. Such conceptions leave men barely any room for expressions of vulnerability or struggles related to mental health issues (Rasmussen, Hjelmeland & Dieserud, 2018). Consequently, men are conditioned from an early age to suppress their emotions, often under the misconception that expressing concerns undermines their masculinity.

The deeply rooted societal expectations and perceptions of strong masculinity in Pakistan ultimately lead to a damaging cycle of silence and stigma. As a result, men in the country are

frequently noted to avoid acknowledging or addressing their feelings, emotions, and struggles due to the fear of facing judgment, shame, or ridicule.

In the specific setting of the university sector in Pakistan, the high-pressure environment coupled with personal challenges faced by students can lead to various untreated mental health issues such as anxiety, stress, depression, and even suicidal intent. Such mental health issues can have a significant influence on the social, personal, and academic well-being of students (Hernández, Ibrayeva, Sparks, Lim, Clementi, Almukhambetova & Muratkyzy, 2020).

Although the challenges can negatively impact

students of all genders, but men in particular suffer more with the added layer of intricacy caused by the stigmas surrounding men's mental health in Pakistan. At its core, such stigma is manifested in the form of various negative stereotypes, taboos, and prejudices directed towards men suffering from mental health problems. The stigma subjects the troubled men to less favorable perceptions, burying their struggles beneath misconceptions (McKenzi, Oliffe, Black & Collings, 2022).

In the existing scholarly work, a notable gap has been noticed in understanding the implications of stigmas associated with mental health in the specific context of male university students in Pakistan. This research will attempt to bridge this gap by analyzing the multifaceted dimensions of the stigma experienced by males in the Pakistani university setting.

Furthermore, it has been noted that many men either refrain from sharing their concerns or prefer to seek support only from informal networks, such as friends or family. The research aims to bring attention to how stigma creates barriers that discourage men from seeking help for challenges related to mental health, specially from formal mental health professionals.

With the intention of addressing and challenging the existing stigma around men's mental health, the research aims to directly engage with male students in Pakistani universities to gain a better understanding of their experiences and perspectives. By attempting to explore the stigma from multiple angles, the goal is to enhance the potential of Pakistan to evolve into a society where people can be able to acknowledge their mental health concerns without fear of any judgment or embarrassment, regardless of their gender.

Review of literature

In many societies around the world, including Pakistan, mental health issues often face underestimation and are typically not taken seriously. Instead, such concerns are either dismissed or attributed to supernatural causes (Karim, Saeed, Rana, Mubbashar, & Jenkins, 2004). As a result, those who suffer from mental

health challenges are often stigmatized within their communities, and their struggles are misinterpreted.

However, in recent years, focus on research work related to mental health in Pakistan has significantly increased, with attention being drawn to the importance of addressing the phenomenon of mental well-being. But the majority of the research work related to mental health focuses primarily on women. This gap in the literature reinforces the myth that men are either immune to mental health challenges or should simply man up and deal with them without making a big deal out of it (Whitley, R., 2021).

Masculinity, in this context, is interpreted through terms like toughness, emotional restraint, and endurance, while expressing any sort of mental concern is considered a mark of shame (Rice, Oliffe, Seidler, Borschmann, Pirkis, & Patton, 2021). This deep-rooted association between masculinity and emotional stoicism profoundly shapes the behavior and attitudes of men in Pakistan with respect to their mental health.

As a result of such conceptions, men in the country become accustomed from an early age to suppressing their feelings, often under the misconception that expressing emotions threatens their masculinity (S de Boise, 2015). Ultimately, men are discouraged from voicing their mental health concerns, which further sustains the stigma around the mental health of men.

Moreover, the stigma surrounding mental illness hinders men from seeking help related to their concerns (Eisenberg, Downs, Golberstein & Zivin, 2009). This fosters a culture of silent suffering, with men opting for informal networks, such as friends or family, if they seek support at all.

Furthermore, the university environment can exacerbate the gravity of the issues, becoming a source of heightened mental health concerns, often intensifying feelings such as stress and anxiety. Students can find themselves struggling with the high-pressure environment coupled with personal challenges that lead to a variety of

mental health issues (Aldiabat, Matani & Navenec, 2014), which, in turn, has the potential to cause a significant increase in the prevalence of mental health stigmas among students.

In addition to all of this, the lack of understanding in Pakistan about challenges related to mental health also fundamentally contributes to the construction of stigma surrounding mental issues among men in the country (Shafiq, 2020). Stigma automatically intensifies when people are not rightly aware of the range of mental health conditions that exist and what mediums for treatment and support can be used to tackle these conditions (Ali, McLachlan, Kanwar & Randhawa, 2017).

Research Methodology

The study used a descriptive research design to fill the gaps in the understanding of the stigma surrounding men's mental health in the context of universities in Pakistan. The descriptive approach focused on obtaining information about attitudes, perspectives, and lived experiences related to mental health stigma among male students.

In the initial phase of the research, a variety of relevant articles and research journals were reviewed to identify areas of concern, with the help of specific keywords such as men's mental health, stigma, university students, and Pakistan. The review of literature was used to ultimately develop an online survey administered to collect data from male university students from all over Pakistan in terms of their experiences of mental health stigmatization.

Table 1

Experiences of Stigma

Response	Number of Students (n)	Percentage (%)
Yes	62	65.3%
No	33	34.7%
Total	95	100%

Several notable themes were highlighted when respondents were asked to specify the type of

On April 20, 2024, the survey was shared via platforms like email, Instagram, and WhatsApp among male university students across Pakistan. A total of 95 students, aged 18 and above, from 22 different universities in 11 cities across Pakistan, including Rawalpindi, Islamabad, Taxila, Faisalabad, Karachi, Multan, Azad Jammu Kashmir, Lahore, Abbottabad, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and, Bahawalpur, filled out the survey.

Through the survey, the students independently reported their lived experiences, which helped gain a better understanding of the complex nature of negative stigma, taboos, stereotypes, and prejudice around men's mental health from a diverse sample of Pakistani university students.

Results and Discussions

The survey produced the following data:

Experiences of Stigma

Among the 95 respondents that participated in the survey, a substantial majority of 62 (65.3%) reported experiencing or witnessing stigma related to men's mental health. In contrast, a minority of 33 respondents (34.7%) reported not encountering such stigma. The results showed that male Pakistani university students experience or witness a worryingly high rate of mental health stigma.

The following table demonstrates the responses of students regarding their experiences of stigma related to men's mental health:

stigma that they had witnessed or experienced concerning men's mental health. The most

common themes that were noted are as follows:

- Association of mental health struggles with weakness in men
- Belief that men should not express their emotions
- Mocking or ridiculing men with mental health issues
- Ignoring men's mental health issues
- Mental health struggles are considered as damage to reputation or masculinity

The findings draw attention to common stigmas that restrict men into suppressing their emotions and feelings under the misguided belief that such expressions are a sign of weakness. Ultimately, men are compelled to maintain an outward display of strength, mostly at the cost of seeking help and prioritizing their mental health.

Furthermore, the results revealed how commonly men's mental health in Pakistan is ignored or faces dismissal rather than being addressed. This shows how mental health issues in the country are overlooked instead of being recognized as legitimate psychological concerns. Hence, men tend to avoid acknowledging their concerns related to mental health, driven by the fear of facing judgment and dismissal.

Moreover, respondents claimed that men struggling with mental health often encounter mockery or ridicule, indicating how men in the

country are belittled in vulnerable states. The findings show how mental health struggles are perceived as damaging to a man's reputation or masculinity, further perpetuating the system of stigma.

Impact of Stigmatization

The survey was created with the aim of exploring how the experiences of stigma impact male students, which revealed several noteworthy themes, which are as follows:

- Stigmatization worsens mental health outcomes for men
- Stigmatization contributes to feelings of isolation and loneliness among male students
- Stigmatization creates barriers to accessing appropriate support and treatment
- Stigma generates a damaging cycle of silence and suffering

Help seeking behaviors

Out of the 95 male students who participated in the survey, 53 students acknowledged considering seeking help for mental health issues. The rest of the 42 students reported otherwise.

The table below displays the number and percentage of male students who considered or did not consider seeking help for mental health issues:

Table 2
Male Students' Willingness to Seek Mental Health Support

Response	Number of Students (n)	Percentage (%)
Considered seeking help	53	55.8
Did not consider seeking help	42	44.2
Total	95	100

The survey revealed various sources from which individuals seek support for mental health

issues. Among all the choices for support, friends, family, and the social circle emerged as

the most dominant selections. The findings bring attention to the importance of peer support networks in dealing with mental health challenges. Respondents also reported seeking help from counselors and mental health professionals, which demonstrates the need for professional help when facing struggles related to mental health.

In contrast, several reasons were noted for the avoidance of seeking help for mental health concerns. The most common cause of reluctance to seek support was reported to be the fear of being perceived as weak and the cultural expectations of strong masculinity. This finding highlights the widespread stigma in the country that suggests expressing struggles related to mental health issues or seeking help is

considered a sign of weakness among men.

Other reasons to avoid seeking support were also brought to light, such as the fear of being judged by others, which further evidences the existence of stigma surrounding men's mental health concerns. Moreover, reasons such as previous negative experiences seeking help and a lack of trust in mental health professionals were also noted to refrain men from seeking support.

The findings from the survey paint an upsetting picture, demonstrating a culture of silence driven by stigma surrounding men's mental health in Pakistan. As a result, a dangerous cycle is created where mental health concerns remain unaddressed, preventing men from achieving ideal mental well-being.

Key Findings

- I. Majority of the male students in the universities of Pakistan have either experienced or witnessed stigmas related to men's mental health.
- II. Men who suffer with mental health issues are usually stigmatized as weak, and often encounter mockery or ridicule.
- III. Mental health issues in the country are mostly ignored or overlooked, instead of being recognized as legitimate psychological concerns.
- IV. The fear of being perceived as weak, and the cultural expectations of strong masculinity is possibly the biggest factor that refrains males from getting support against mental health issues.
- V. A significant lack of confidence plagues the mental health care system in Pakistan.

Conclusion

The research aimed to explore the complex nature of stigma around men's mental health within the university settings of Pakistan, by digging into relevant experiences, challenges and perceptions of male students in the country.

With the use of a survey method, the research discovered that a notable majority of male students in the country have either experienced or witnessed stigmas related to mental health. Key themes of stigma that were recorded included the association of mental health struggles with weakness in men, the belief that men should not express emotions, dismissal of men's mental health issues, and ridicule faced by men struggling with mental health issues.

Ultimately, due to such stigmas, men face barriers in seeking help for mental health concerns, due to the sustained fear of facing judgment or shame.

The research highlights the urgent need for targeted interventions in order to challenge the damaging stigmas associated with men's mental health in the country, and to spark a conversation that has long been overdue. In this way, we can strive towards a future where every struggle is acknowledged, and every individual, regardless of gender, receives the help that they need. Ultimately, Pakistan can move towards being a more supportive society.

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