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Gender Differences in Emotional Expressivity and Its Impact on Personal Growth Initiative

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ABSTRACT

The present research investigated gender differences in emotional expressivity and the impact of emotional expressivity on personal growth initiative. The sample consisted of 300 university students from various disciplines of University of Peshawar between 18-23 years of age. The data was collected both online and physically through convenience sampling technique. Two validated scales Emotional Expressivity (Kring, Smith, & Neale, 1994) and Personal Growth Initiative (Robitschek, 1998) were used to measure the variables. The results revealed a significant negative impact of emotional expressivity on personal growth initiative and males scored high on emotional expressiveness than females. The results signify that while claiming gender differences in emotions, the context is important in which they are studied and that emotions can hamper one's potential for growth.

Keywords: Emotional Expressivity, Personal Growth Initiative, Convenience Sampling.

INTRODUCTION

Emotions play a significant part in an individual's life; they make the life colourful but can also create problems if not properly regulated (Greenberg, 2012). Adolescence is particularly considered as a period of storm and stress due to over whelming emotional states (Arnett, 1999). It is also the time period for taking initiatives and developing one's potentials (Dworkin et al. (2003). It is important to see how this emotional experience interacts with one's positive potentials of growth. Similarly, in a collectivistic culture like Pakistan, emotional expression may be more open. It will be interesting to note whether males show their emotions openly or females. The present study aims to investigate the interplay of emotional expressivity, personal growth initiative and gender differences in emotional expressions.

Emotional Expressivity refers to the ability and willingness to outwardly display emotions, both positive (e.g., joy, affection) and negative (e.g., anger, sadness) (Kring et al., 1994). Individuals who portray higher emotional expressivity experience greater positive affect, participate more in social interactions and demonstrate better moment-to-moment social functioning (Burgin et al., 2012). Emotional expressivity is crucial for both human intrapersonal and interpersonal functioning and its deficit can not only impair functioning but,

in extreme cases, can also lead to pathological conditions. (Burgin et al., 2012). Culture impacts the expression of emotions; especially in collectivist cultures like Pakistan, social harmony is maintained by confirming with family and friends and controlling emotional expression (Ramzan & Amjad, 2022). Research suggests that belongingness fosters emotional openness by creating a secure environment for self-disclosure (Clark & Finkel, 2005). As emotions can be both positive and negative, the influence they generate may depend on the type of emotions shown. Usually, positive emotions cater positive results whereas negative ones bring problems with them. One impact emotion can have is on an individual's strive for growth, called as Personal Growth Initiative (PGI). Personal growth initiative is a proactive commitment to self-improvement and development, PGI includes goal-setting, resilience, and adaptability (Robitschek et al., 2012). PGI is an intentional and active personal resource for self-development (Weigold et al., 2013) and has four characteristics including readiness for change (openness to growth), planfulness (strategic goal-setting), use of resources (seeking external support) and intentional behavior (intentional action toward goals) (Robitschek et al., 2012). Personal growth initiative is also one of the core constructs of psychological wellbeing (Ryff & Keyes, 1995). Social support systems, including siblings, often provide the encouragement needed for such growth (Ryff & Singer, 2008).

While studying university students, researchers initially considered cognitive constructs like intelligence as strong predictors of goal attainment, but recent studies focus on other non-cognitive constructs that can be linked to goal attainment, like, emotional awareness and personal initiative (Al Bajali, 2019). Al Bajali (2019) revealed a non-significant but negative relationship between emotional awareness and personal growth initiative. While studying university students, researchers initially considered cognitive constructs like intelligence as strong predictors of goal attainment (Ackerman & Kanfer, 2025), but recent studies focus on other non-cognitive constructs, that can be linked to goal attainment, like, emotional awareness and personal initiative (Malanchini et al., 2024). A meta-analysis reported that emotional intelligence is closely related to emotional awareness which is significantly and positively associated with personal growth initiative (Weigold et al., 2020). In contrast, Al-Bajali (2019) found a non-significant but negative relationship between emotional awareness and personal growth initiative among final-year bachelor students.

The present research also tried to find gender differences in emotional expressivity. Research literature shows a mix of findings related to gender differences in emotional expressivity due to which the hypothesis was kept bidirectional, for example, Hidayah et al., (2024) found no significant gender difference in emotional expression among tik tok users. Deng et al., (2016) investigated gender differences in emotional experience and expression and found mix results, revealing men and women showing difference in heart rate according to the type of content watched. Women showed internalizing of sadness more than men. For emotions of anger, amusement, and pleasure, males manifested more decline in heart rate, while, females showed heightened arousal. Their results revealed that to emotional videos males showed more intense emotional experiences, while, females showed higher emotional expressivity, especially for negative emotions. Additionally, gender differences were due to the type of emotion not its valence. Likewise, Wang et al., (2022) found more emotional expressivity in females than males in terms of anticipated and consummatory pleasure than males, while, males were better in cognitive flexibility than females. Panjwani, et al., (2016) concluded that

gender differences in emotion expression were influenced by socioeconomic status and stress among adolescents.

These mix findings suggest that emotional expressivity should be studied in Pakistan which is a patriarchal and collectivistic culture, different than the Western societies to see how males and females show their emotions here.

Rationale of the Study

Emotional expressivity, or the outward indication of emotional states, is linked to beneficial social behaviours and higher positive feelings in daily life. It is an indicator of healthy psychological functioning (Burgin et al., 2012). Experience sampling studies show that people high on emotional expressivity report positive emotions more frequently and have more social engagement. This suggests that it can be facilitative to self development and growth. Moreover, emotional expressivity is linked to subjective well-being, including life satisfaction, indicating that expressivity may represent a psychological resource useful for self-enhancement.

Research on gender differences in emotional expression reveals small but significant differences that consider context, developmental stage, and cultural norms. A review analysis found that women tended to express more positive and internalized emotions - emotions like sadness and anxiety. Conversely, men tend to express more external emotions like anger, but these gender differences are often minimal and context dependent (Chaplin & Aldao, 2013). Experimental studies have also suggested that men may feel and display the physical aspects of emotions more intensely in some circumstances than women, while women usually display stronger expressive responses across the entire suite of emotions (Deng et al., 2016). Overall, these results suggest that we need to look at how gender patterns of emotional expression connect to growth orientations such as Personal Growth Initiative (PGI). This study will examine the relationship between emotional expression and PGI, particularly in cultural contexts that may have different display rules with respect to gender, which will tie emotional functioning to self-directed development.

Objectives

1. To investigate the role of emotional expressivity in personal growth initiative of a person.
2. To assess gender differences in emotional expressivity.

Hypotheses

1. Emotional expressivity will have an impact on personal growth initiative.
2. There will be significant gender differences in emotional expressivity.

METHOD

Sample

The sample comprised of 300 students studying in different universities of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa between 18 to 23 years of age. The participants were selected through a convenience sampling technique. The sample had equal number of males and females (50% males and 50% females). In age 62% were between 18-21 years, 38% between 22-25 years. All of them were students of BS program. While, in socioeconomic status 20% belonged to lower socioeconomic status, 68% to middle class, 12% were from upper class. Data was collected from students of different disciplines, and the participation was voluntary with consent obtained previously.

Instruments

Emotional Expressivity Scale (EES)

The Emotional Expressivity Scale is a self-report questionnaire (Kring, Smith, & Neale, 1994) that is used to measure the extent to which individuals outwardly express their emotions. It consists of 17 items rated on Likert scale, assessing both the frequency and intensity of emotional expression. Higher scores on the scale suggest a greater propensity for emotional expression, capturing both the frequency and intensity of emotional displays. The EES has demonstrated strong internal consistency, with reported Cronbach's alpha coefficient typically ranging from .86 to .90, which indicates that the items on the scale reliably measure the same underlying construct.

Personal Growth Initiative Scale (PGIS)

The Personal Growth Initiative Scale (Robitschek, 1998) measures an individual's active and intentional involvement in changing and developing as a person. It includes items that reflect goal setting, self-improvement, and behavior change, rated on a Likert scale.

Higher scores reflect a greater tendency to engage in purposeful strategies aimed at self-improvement. The scale has shown excellent internal consistency, with a reported Cronbach's alpha of approximately .90.

Procedure

The study used two empirically validated and reliable instruments to assess the variables of interest: the Emotional Expressivity Scale, and the Personal Growth Initiative Scale. These tools were selected for their strong psychometric properties and relevance to the constructs under investigation. Data collection was carried out using both online digitally and through physically applying paper-based formats. For the online portion of data collection, a digital questionnaire was developed, beginning with an informed consent statement, followed by demographic questions and the selected psychological scales. This version was distributed through university-related WhatsApp groups and yielded 35 completed responses. The remaining 265 responses were obtained through physical distribution. Printed copies of the questionnaire were handed out to students across the university campus, with participation being entirely voluntary. The entire data collection process spanned approximately 2 weeks. Once, completed all responses were carefully entered into IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 25), where appropriate statistical procedures were conducted to examine the research hypotheses and analyze the key variables

RESULTS

Table 1: Psychometric Properties of EES and PGIS Scales

Scales	No of items	M	SD	Range	Coefficient A
EES	17	57.36	9.20	26-88	.54
PGIS	9	34.54	7.81	16-56	.74

Note: EES = Emotional Expressivity Scale, PGIS = Personal Growth Initiative Scale

Table 1 shows that The EES has Coefficient alpha of 0.54 which shows moderate reliability. The PGIS has Coefficient $\alpha = 0.74$ which is high reliability.

Table 2: Simple linear Regression Analysis predicting Personal Growth Initiative from Emotional Expressivity

Variable	B	SE	β	T	p
Constant	45.902	2.782		16.498	.000
Emotional Expressivity	-.198	.048	-.233	-4.136	.000
R ²	.054				

Table 2 indicates that emotional expressivity is a significant negative predictor ($-.233, p < .001$) of personal growth initiative meaning that more open expression of one's emotions may lead to obstacles in one's way of achieving one's potentials. The model explains 5.4% of variance in personal growth initiative while rest of the variance is explained by other factors.

Table 3: T-value showing significant differences between males and females on Internet Addiction

Variables	Males		Females		t(298)	P	Cohen's d
	M	SD	M	SD			
Emotional Expressivity	58.61	7.91	56.10	10.20	2.37	.009	00.27

Table 3 indicates a comparison between males and females on social connectedness ($t(197)=2.37, p < .01$). Males showed significantly higher scores on emotional expressivity than females ($M=56.10 > M=58.61$).

DISCUSSION

The first hypothesis of the study was confirmed with emotional expressivity having a significant impact on personal growth initiative, explaining 5.4% of variation in PGI. It negatively contributed in PGI ($\beta = -.23, p < .001$) meaning the more one expresses emotions the less personally one develops. Different explanations can be put forward in this regard, for example it is possible that our emotions may interfere with our decision making ability that impairs our process of growth (Ibadullayeva et al., 2024). As in the present difference was not sought between individuals are utilizing which emotion more, it is possible they be focusing more on negative emotions that is why their scores on PGI decreased Baumeister et al. (2001). A meta-analysis of personal growth initiative and mental health revealed that higher negative affect is consistently associated with lower PGI scores, indicating that individuals who experience or focus more on negative emotions may struggle to engage in growth-oriented behaviors (Weigold et al., 2020). Findings from recent research during the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated that anxiety and stress significantly influenced decision-making styles, often leading to less rational and less adaptive approaches under pressure, which can in turn limit personal development opportunities (Marques da Rocha et al., 2023).

The negativity bias, as supported by neuroscience and individual differences research, suggests that negative emotional information is processed more thoroughly and given more weight than positive information, a pattern that can direct attention away from constructive growth activities (Norris & Inzlicht, 2019).

Another possible factor can be the age group of the respondents, as they were university students it is possible that their emotional expressivity was high due to lack of control on it as being students currently they scored low on PGI. Older adults demonstrate greater flexibility in selecting and implementing emotion regulation strategies compared to younger adults. Younger individuals, including university students, are more likely to rely on less effective or

less varied strategies, which can result in higher emotional expressivity and lower control. This developmental difference in regulation skills may contribute to lower personal growth initiative scores in younger populations (Eldesouky & English, 2018).

The second hypothesis about significant gender differences in the expression of emotions was also supported by the results ($t(298)=2.37, p<.01$). One possible explanation for this result can be cultural differences, as in some cultures, like many Asian cultures, people might suppress emotional expressivity and value emotional restraint, while other cultures, like the U.S., value emotional expression (Mesquita & Frijda, 1992). Studies conducted in West find women as more expressive than men (Gross & John, 2023), but our research revealed the contrary result. Similarly, Veijalainen, Reunamo, and Heikkilä (2021) revealed that females showed more neutral, calm or peaceful-related emotional expressions, whereas, males manifested more surprise, curiosity, anger or frustration-related emotions. It is possible as males show more negative emotions due to which in our data there was a negative impact of emotional expressivity on personal growth initiative. Wang (2025) studied the interaction of gender related norms and emotional regulation in determining adolescents' emotional expression. He integrated Gross's model of emotion regulation and social constructionist framework to see how boys and girls internalize and reacts to culturally specific emotional norms. His study indicated males demonstrating more emotional suppression, whereas, females showed more cognitive reappraisal. Additionally, the perceived gender norms mediated the link between gender and emotional expression along with cultural context moderating these effects. These findings help us in understanding the contrary result of our study in which males scored higher on emotional expressivity than females as the psychological and sociocultural mechanisms affects the expression of emotions. Brody (1985) has already foreseen this interplay by suggesting that emotions can motivate and regulate behaviors, but the researchers must study gender differences in emotional development being affected by different familial, sociocultural, and interpersonal roles in the society that shape males and females' roles they have to adapt.

Different theoretical approaches can explain the gender difference in emotional expression, for example Hall (as cited in Brody, 1993) considered socialization as one of the important factors affecting emotional expression. According to him cultural and historical factors affect the socialization practices due to which subsequent generation copies and internalizes the values, behaviors, and parenting styles of the generation preceding them (Brody, 1993).

Limitation and Suggestions

The basic limitation of the study is that it was not ruled out which type of emotional expressivity the respondents show due to which the negative impact of emotional expressivity on PGI and gender difference in it remains underexplored. It may be affected by the negative or positive emotion instead of just the overall score on the scale. Keeping this limitation in mind the future studies should study the impact of emotions with reference to the type of emotions showed.

It is also possible that the age of the respondents may made them more prone to both emotional expressivity and less progress in PGI. Future research should use a more diverse sample to have amore representative sample and generalizability of results.

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