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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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Undergraduate Students' Lived Experiences of Building and Maintaining Interpersonal Relationships

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Abstract: This phenomenological study aimed to explore undergraduate students' lived experiences of building and maintaining interpersonal relationships. A qualitative research approach along with interpretivism paradigm was used to conduct study. This research used the phenomenological research design. The departments in the faculty of social sciences at the The University of Lahore were the population of this study. A total of eighteen (18) students was the sample in the study, which was carefully chosen through purposive sampling technique. A Semi-structured interview protocol was developed for data collection. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data by using Nvivo 12.0. The responses were used to identify themes which addressed the research questions of the study. Themes were emerged from the responses to answer the research questions of the study. The responses were used to identify themes which addressed the research questions of the study. Results of the study showed that these personal relationships are not an extra or what is considered to be a secondary part of the process. They are vital to a student's sense of belonging, well-being and achievement and are a part of schooling. It is concluded that universities need to be more purposeful in designing spaces and programs that cultivate these important connections, ultimately leading students not just to succeed in their courses, but thrive in life. It is recommended that universities may develop structured programs and activities that encourage meaningful interaction among students, particularly during the first year, to help them establish supportive interpersonal relationships.

Keywords: Interpersonal Relationships, Undergraduate Students, Lived Experiences, University Life

Introduction

The beginning of university is a monumental change. University is more than homework and tests; it's a lively social universe in which students create the friendships that determine the college experience. This research examines the authentic, everyday lives of undergraduate students as they develop friendships, engage with faculty, and negotiate their relationships. A lively social universe in which students create the friendships that determine university life. Many factors are responsible for the social and interpersonal relations of university students. It is important for students to keep their relationships and make new ones during university, as these may be a source of great support while they are going through their transition on campus and also during the whole university life (Pownall, Harris, & Blundell-Birtill, 2021).

For some young adults, it involves leaving behind familiar faces and places and entering into a new, often confusing, social environment. The relationship between students and teachers positively affects university students' knowledge retention and achievement (Hagenauer & Volet, 2014). Students interact on a daily basis; they have discussions about news, thoughts, feelings, information, and present their points of view to their university fellows. This ability of students to brilliantly carry out these actions is called communication

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skills. Nowadays, this ability seems to be the most critical factor of student life so that they can uphold good relationships with one another. In the journey of education, good relationships are considered a support for student mental wellbeing, especially with respect to stress regulation (Anhert et al., 2012). University students' relationships with campus life sometimes seem a mystery, but a good relationship helps their healthy and successful university experience. For some young adults, it involves leaving behind familiar faces and places and entering into a new, often confusing, social environment.

Between lectures and reading, an important part of the university experience is played out: the development of friends, mentors, and community. The process of adjustment is multidimensional and it is more than academic adaptation. It involves adapting to new social settings and developing interpersonal relationships (Reyagaletsa et al., 2020). Students who enter the university have to navigate these new dynamics, often with insignificant support mechanisms in place to facilitate the transition. Maunder (2022) emphasizes that solid peer relationships, along with attachment to the university, nurture a sense of belonging, which is essential for successful adjustment. We all know about it instinctively that these relationships are of much importance, but their deep impact on a student's experience is often lost in the larger discussion of higher education. Close friendships with class fellows, mentors, or faculty can act as a lifeline. They offer emotional support during times of stress, inspire collaboration on scholarly projects, and create a sense of belonging that makes an intimidating campus feel like home. On the other hand, difficulties with social isolation or loneliness can greatly suppress a student's happiness and grades. Whereas great emphasis has been placed on studies of academic achievement, less has been done to stop and listen to the student and learn about the complex reality of social life from their own point of view. Self-reflection usually acts as a simple coping policy for university students (Hathaway & O'Shields, 2021).

It has been examined by higher education network-based literature that relationships with peers and, to some extent, instructional relationships, students are also surrounded by relationships with family, coworkers, and others outside postsecondary organizations that affect their experiences (Mayhew et al., 2016; Small, 2017). How do they really develop these connections? What are the problems in sustaining them? How do these relationships influence their everyday lives?

This research seeks to answer those questions by placing the student voice at its center. The researcher used a qualitative phenomenological design, conducting semi-structured interviews with undergraduates in order to listen to their own stories. This is not about counting the number of their friends, but about knowing the quality and meaning of these relationships. By learning about these experiences, it can better assist students in developing the strong, healthy relationships that form the basis of a satisfying and successful university experience. This paper describes how the researcher heard from and learned about students, outlines the dominant themes in their stories, and considers what these outcomes mean for how universities can create more connected and caring communities.

Review of Related Literature

The consequences of social life at university, which include social support (Wilcox, Winn, & Fyvie-Gauld, 2005), belonging (Meehan & Howells, 2018), and attachment (Buote et al., 2007), have a plethora of prevailing research support that links to general wellbeing and learning of the students. Actually, developing adults are at an age where they have to face many issues, such as depression and anxiety, that appear first (Kessler et al., 2007; Macalli et al., 2021). Moving from the familiar environment of college to the complex life of university brings many challenges, both personal and academic, that require official support to navigate properly (Poquet et al., 2021). A set of influences mostly responsible for shaping the nature of students' peer networks, which differentiates from major influences in other circumstances (Smith & Vonhoff, 2019). To explain lower levels of well-being for students in higher education, pressure of high performance and performance motivation are mostly used (Dopmeijer et al., 2021).

Students' interpersonal interactions are affected by the environments of the campus in which they are surrounded, along with their routines (Small et al., 2015). For undergraduates at university, attendance means living far from family and friends for the first time, along with having new friendships in a vast university environment (Boddy, 2020). Thoman, Sansone, and Pasupathi (2007) found that due to social interaction, engaging in some activity increases their interest, and it also has an impact on their interest and motivation when the activity is accomplished. Good relations with peers and a strong sense of belonging to the university are very important and help students to feel integrated and supported (Ndhlovu & Mwanza, 2024).

Mostly, students make relationships at the start of the study semester that help them to make their groups for the sake of study (Brown, 2019; McCabe, 2016), and this bonding can change with the passage of time. There are more than one reason to strengthen these relationships, such as physical nearness, enrollment in a course, co-curricular activities, and the social identities that various students possess (Marin & Hampton, 2019; Smith & Vonhoff, 2019). Proximity and space have a vital role in university relationship construction and maintenance. Proximity affects the ways that students interact through several types of relationships, which include relationships with faculty, other staff, and peers (Pokorny et al., 2017; Small & Adler, 2019). These relationships and interaction content are responsible for students' responses to the interactions with faculty (Smith et al., 2023). Small (2017) demonstrated that usually students do not turn to long-lasting core discussion with group members (often close friends and family) when they have to face a personal problem and want to discuss, which calls into question the common opinion that trust and societal support are naturally found together.

Students' association at campus life may seem to be a secret, but good relations help them to have a healthy and successful university experience. Research identified the factors in classrooms that allow students to flourish and achieve successful learning outcomes. It is an essential part of university life to have relationships with both peers and teachers (Shin 2002). Specifically, teachers and students' interaction in the classroom has always been related to students' learning outcomes (Anderson & Carta-Falsa, 2002; Dingel & Puntì, 2023). Teacher-student relationships are also associated with many other variables that ultimately lead to better student learning, which includes academic engagement along with students' approach to getting knowledge about course material (Estep & Roberts, 2015; Leslie, 2019). This relationship helps students so that they can feel relaxed with their teachers and enhance their motivation and learning (Thakur et al., 2019). Teachers' characteristics such as flexibility, reflection, concern, justice, communication, creation of an interest in class, availability, and receptivity to the feedback of students all have been considered as critical to the growth of faculty-student rapport (Thakur et al., 2019).

Research has revealed that although they teach their subject matter very well, student involvement and learning outcomes are compromised if faculty cannot create rapport with their students (Thakur et al., 2019). So, rapport is about how students feel better with their connection to teachers, how much they like them, and how much they perceive that professors understand their ideas and feelings. As a socially gathered place, university has the potential to bring students together with shared and diverse interests and backgrounds, by encouraging belonging on different scales (Mulrooney & Kelly, 2021). Occasionally, teacher-student relationships or even peer relationships are also affected, and sometimes they do not have a good relationship with faculty members (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Noel et al., 2021).

Statement of the Problem

The university social scene can be every bit as difficult as classes. But when we mention student support, we usually only think about academic support and neglect a very important component of the equation. We are not so good at listening to students' personal social experiences, as they tell them. We must listen to the students about their frustrations of not being able to find a group of friends, the stress of new relationships, and the silent loneliness that statistics cannot measure. Lacking an understanding of these human experiences, our attempts at building a caring campus community will always come up a little short.

Objective of the Study

Objective of present study was to explore undergraduate students’ lived experiences of building and maintaining interpersonal relationships

Methodology

This study aimed to explore the undergraduate students’ lived experiences of building and maintaining interpersonal relationships. A qualitative research approach along with the interpretivism paradigm was used to conduct the study. This study employed the phenomenological research design. The population of this study comprised departments from the Faculty of Social Sciences at The University of Lahore. The sample of the study comprised eighteen students selected using the purposive sampling technique. For data collection, a semi-structured interview protocol was developed. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data using NVivo 12.0. Themes emerged from the responses to answer the research questions of the study.

Results

The analysis of participants’ descriptions reveals that interpersonal relations in university life are deeply intertwined with the nature of their social and academic relationships. Under the theme “*Relationship with Class Fellows and Teachers*”, sub-themes such as *Positive Bonding*, *Academic Cooperation*, and *Supportive and Approachable Teachers* demonstrate how strong peer and teacher support systems mitigate emotional difficulties, fostering resilience, belonging, and confidence. On the other hand, experiences of *Limited Social Interaction*, *Selective Friendships*, or *Feeling Different* or *Socially Isolated* highlight emotional struggles that hinder inclusion, often leaving students to cope with their stress alone. Teachers often emerged as emotional anchors, and some students even described the support as “therapy,” suggesting that faculty play a two-fold role in academic and psychological wellbeing.

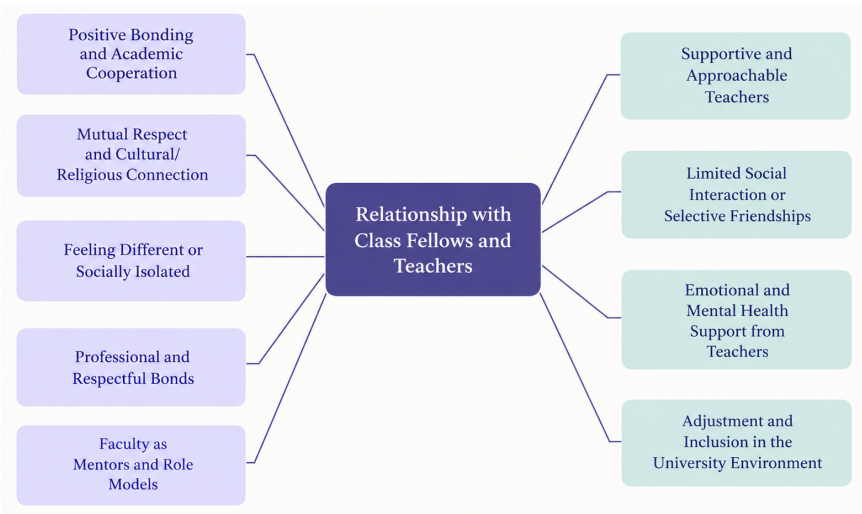
Research Question

- Describe your relationships with class fellows and teachers at the university?

Main theme: Relationship with Class Fellows and Teachers

Figure 1

Relationship with Class Fellows and Teachers



Sub Theme 1. Positive Bonding and Academic Cooperation

A large number of participants elaborated that they have strong, friendly, and cooperative relationships with their classmates. These relationships most often extend to helping each other academically, while working on group assignments, and guiding those peers who are new or struggling.

R1 told, *"We have good relations with our class fellows... when we face an issue in a subject or topic, we do group studies... good bonding."*

R9 added, *"If I ask for anything... they help me a lot... they helped me a lot in the university environment to assimilate."*

R11 shared, *"I have made three best friends... if even one of them is absent, my day feels incomplete."*

R18 confirmed, *"My whole department... I have found a good friend circle, in fact, I have found a family."*

This Sub Theme reflects the importance of peer networking by providing both academic and emotional support during hard times in university life.

Sub Theme 2. Supportive and Approachable Teachers

Many respondents appreciated that their teachers have a helpful and friendly nature. Teachers support them not only in academics but, in some cases, also provide personal guidance when students need it.

R2 described, *"Teachers help me in my studies... if there is any problem, we discuss it."*

R4 expressed, *"Teachers also respect us more than other university students... they give us proper time and explain things again."*

R5 highlighted, *"I am very inspired by... Dr. Malik Sahib... he never gets hyper."*

R15 further added, *"Teachers are, able, supportive, ready to help, really good... they accommodate us too much."*

Sub Theme 3. Mutual Respect and Cultural/Religious Connection

Some participants highlighted how shared cultural or religious backgrounds played a part in strengthening bonds.

R4 expressed, *"Mostly class fellows came from same madrassah... we respect them a lot, they respect us a lot."*

R5 also noted, *"Among the professors... they also taught us in Jamia... they explained that thing again and we easily understood it."*

Sub Theme 4. Limited Social Interaction or Selective Friendships

All participants were not engaged equally in socializing. Some liked to maintain a selective circle due to personal preferences or boundaries.

R5 shared, *"I don't expose myself too much... I am also a CR of my class."*

R15 indicated, *"I am not too personal with my classmates... in our personal lives, we don't interfere too much."*

R12 voiced, *"I don't interact with girls... teachers are supportive."*

Sub Theme 5. Feeling Different or Socially Isolated

Sometimes students have to face unique life circumstances, such as being married or having kids. They felt socially distant from peers due to different reasons.

R7 reported, *"They avoid me because I am married... they think I should have a boyfriend... but I want to meet everyone."*

Sub Theme 6. Emotional and Mental Health Support from Teachers

Some of the participants shared that they turn to their teachers for guidance and emotional support whenever they have some difficult times.

R15 said, *"There is a teacher with whom I could contact... it was like therapy for me."*

R9 stated, *"I can share my personal problems with a teacher... she helped me a lot."*

Sub Theme 7. Professional and Respectful Bonds

Many participants sustained a purely respectful and professional relationship with teachers and classmates, avoiding personal involvement but keeping good interactions.

R16 explained, *"With everyone... I have friendly, professional bond... I have never had a problem with anyone."*

R14 further added, *"Teachers are very appreciative... we are not facing any problems."*

Sub Theme 8. Adjustment and Inclusion in the University Environment

Some participants talked about their journey of adjustment in university life and described how class fellows helped them feel included.

R9 shared, *"Because I came here for bridging... these people helped me a lot... took me around."*

R11 also noted, *"In the beginning... we didn't talk much... but now we help each other."*

Sub Theme 9. Faculty as Mentors and Role Models

A few respondents expressed feelings of deep admiration for certain teachers, seeing them as role models of life beyond academics.

R5 expressed, *"I am inspired by my teachers... I have learned not to be extreme in religion."* R14 further added, *"Teachers give us guidance for university and further life."*

Table 1

Frequency among Respondents of the Study

S#	Theme	Frequency	Respondents
1.	Positive Bonding and Academic Cooperation	11	R1, R2, R3, R6, R9, R10, R11, R13, R16, R17, R18
2.	Supportive and Approachable Teachers	13	R1, R2, R3, R4, R5, R6, R8, R9, R10, R14, R15, R17, R18
3.	Mutual Respect and Cultural/Religious Connection	2	R4, R5
4.	Limited Social Interaction or Selective Friendships	3	R5, R12, R15
5.	Feeling Different or Socially Isolated	1	R7
6.	Emotional and Mental Health Support from Teachers	3	R4, R9, R15
7.	Professional and Respectful Bonds	2	R14, R16
8.	Adjustment and Inclusion in University Environment	2	R9, R11
9.	Faculty as Mentors and Role Models	2	R5, R14

Conclusion

Overall, students described that university has a commonly positive and supportive environment, marked by strong bonding with peers and cooperative, approachable teachers. Class fellows mostly help each other at the time of need academically and personally, creating a sense of belonging and mutual respect. Teachers are also widely appreciated for their guidance, understanding, and willingness to assist both in academic matters and personal problems, sometimes even offering emotional support. While a few students mentioned occasional social challenges or personal limitations, the prevailing sentiment reflects a cooperative, respectful, and encouraging academic community.

Discussion

This qualitative study aimed to explore the undergraduate students' lived experiences of building and maintaining interpersonal relationships. Understanding the lived world of an individual based on their personal viewpoint provides a better perspective of human realities. The term lived experience is used, which is closely associated with the philosophical approach along with the qualitative research method of

phenomenology. Cronbach (1975) claims that statistical research cannot take full account of the many interaction effects that occur in social settings. The findings of the study revealed that overall, students describe a generally positive and supportive environment in their university, marked by strong bonds with classmates and cooperative, approachable teachers. Moreover, students perceive balancing university and personal life as a continuous challenge that demands planning, discipline, and adaptability, but with the passage of time, they develop strategies to cope with it through time management, prioritizing tasks, and seeking peer support. Demir et al. (2019) described that good interpersonal relationships were related to better perceptions of the course, more content learned, and fewer absences. On the other hand, Schriver and Harr Kulynych (2021) did not find a relation between rapport and student struggle, attendance, or grades which students achieve. Relationship was related to self-reported improved learning, interest, and enhanced motivation, however (Schriver & Harr Kulynych, 2021). By gathering these findings, it suggests a healthy relationship between students and faculty members. Students may be more closely connected with affective, rather than behavioral, engagement. In deep learning, the student is mostly motivated by an intrinsic interest during the learning; correspondingly, their learning approach is to find meaning in the material which they are studying, mostly by relating what they are learning to their previously acquired knowledge along with their own personal experiences and interests (Baeten et al., 2010; Song et al., 2021). We emphasize that personal development mainly depends on subjective understanding of events, where emotions and thoughts interact. This process profiles learning and psychological growth, as individuals respond to their social environments based on their prior experiences and cultural context (Blunden, 2016; Fleer, 2020). Additionally, we do not aim to understand individuals' lived experiences as facts, but to determine logical meanings of these experiences (Lindseth & Norberg, 2004).

Conclusion

Findings of the study revealed that these personal relationships are not an aside to schooling; they are core to a student's sense of belonging, mental well-being, and achievement. It is concluded that universities need to be more purposeful in designing spaces and programs that cultivate these important connections, ultimately leading students not just to succeed in their courses, but to thrive in life. It is recommended that universities develop structured programs and activities that encourage meaningful interaction among students, particularly during the first year, to help them establish supportive interpersonal relationships.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are suggested after this study.

1. Attention can be paid to students' relationships on campus, and with the help of positive support, their academic and non-academic experiences can be made better. The university should not isolate students in the midst of social change but become an important agent of change so that they can contribute directly to national development along with their own personal development.
2. It is also important for universities to improve the opportunities for student and faculty interaction so that both of them move beyond the barriers and adopt better methods to design better peer-mentoring programs and group-work opportunities.
3. In this phenomenological study, the lived experiences of students at the undergraduate level in the Faculty of Social Sciences were explored. This design of qualitative research can also be
4. applied to other faculties and at the postgraduate level.

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