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Depression Among First-Year Undergraduate Students in a Public University in West Bengal

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KEYWORDS Cross-sectional Survey. Depression Anxiety Stress Scales. Level of Depression. Socio-demographic Variables. Undergraduate Students

ABSTRACT The present research seeks to study the prevalence of depression among first-year undergraduate students in a public university in West Bengal, and to examine the association between first-year undergraduate students' depression and some of their socio-demographic variables, that is, gender, religion, stream, living arrangement and habitat. A sample size of 141 students were studied using cross-sectional survey design. The results revealed that the highest number of students were in moderate levels of depression, followed by normal, mild, severe and extremely severe levels. There was no statistically significant relationship between depression and the socio-demographic variables namely, gender, religion, living arrangement and habitat. However, there was only a minor and significant association between stream and depression among first-year undergraduate students.

INTRODUCTION

Depression, as stated by the World Health Organisation (2023), is a prevalent mental disorder that affects a significant number of individuals worldwide. Depression is a primary factor in causing impairment on a global scale and significantly contributes to the overall burden of disease worldwide. According to the National Institute of Mental Health (2023), depression is characterised by enduring feelings of melancholy and a lack of interest in everyday activities. It distinguishes itself from mood oscillations and transient emotional reactions that individuals encounter in their everyday lives. Prolonged and severe depression can escalate into a significant health concern. It can lead to significant symptoms that impact cognitive, emotional, and behavioural functioning, consequently impairing overall functionality. Severe depression can result in suicide, which is the second most common cause of death globally among individuals aged 15-29 years, according to the World Health Organisation (2023). Research has demonstrated that depression can have a detrimental impact on students' academic performance, both during their time in school and afterward (Zaid et al. 2007, Mohd et al. 2003). It can create difficulties in decision making and time management (Chen et al. 2013). Depression can also lead to decreased attention, drug abuse, excessive alcohol consumption, and increased smoking among adults and university students (Yusoff et al. 2013). Meeks et al. (2023) conducted a study to determine the frequency of depression, anxiety, and stress among students and faculty/staff at a university in the Midwestern region. The results revealed that a significant proportion of the campus community, specifically 33 percent, reported experiencing severe symptoms. In a study conducted by Fauzi et al. (2021), it was discovered that 51.4 percent of students faced depression. In their study, Hamaideh et al. (2022) discovered that a considerable proportion of students, specifically 78.7 percent experienced depression. The researchers also identified substantial connections between depression, stress, and anxiety, as well as demographic, health-related, and lifestyle characteristics. In a study conducted by Karing (2021), the author investigated the frequency of depression, anxiety, and stress among university students in Germany during the initial phase of lockdown. The survey revealed that on average, pupils exhibited minor indications of depression and anxiety, along with moderate levels of perceived stress. The main characteristics that provided protection against depression, anxiety, and stress were mindfulness and optimism. Risk factors for worsening mental health problems and stress during the COVID-19 pandemic include many stresses associated to COVID-19, such as worries about scholastic and financial challenges,

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exposure to media coverage, the experience of quarantine, and personal traits including neuroticism, older age, and being female. Ramón-Arbués et al. (2020) conducted a study that examined the prevalence of depression, anxiety, and stress symptoms, as well as the factors associated with these symptoms, among college students. The researchers utilised the Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scale (DASS-21) as a measurement tool. The survey indicated a moderate prevalence of depression (18.4%) symptom among students. Significant correlations were observed between symptoms of stress and several factors, including problematic internet use, smoking, sleeplessness, low self-esteem, being female, living with family, having a stable love connection, regular alcohol intake, and bad nutritional habits. Gao et al. (2020) investigated the gender-based discrepancies in depression, anxiety, and stress levels among college students throughout their four-year academic tenure. However, there was no discernible gender discrepancy in the mean levels of depression and stress among the students. Whereas in a psychometric study conducted by Haq et al. (2018), it was shown that male university students displayed elevated levels of depression, stress, and anxiety in comparison to their female counterparts. In a study conducted by Alim et al. (2017) in Bangladesh, it was shown that first-year MBBS students had a significant occurrence of depression, anxiety, and stress.

The primary focus of the present study was on the first-year undergraduate students admitted in a public university namely Jadavpur University in West Bengal. A comprehensive investigation was conducted to explore the levels of depression of such students, which had not previously been examined in any existing studies. The problem of the study was defined as, "*Depression among First-Year Undergraduate Students in a Public University in West Bengal.*"

Objectives

The objectives of the current study were established as follows:

1. To assess the prevalence of depression among first-year undergraduate students in a public university of West Bengal.
2. To examine the correlation between first-year undergraduate students' depression and some of their social-demographic factors.

Delimitations

The present study was delimited to the following grounds:

1. Only first-year undergraduate students admitted in the academic session of 2023-2024 in Jadavpur University of West Bengal were selected for the study.
2. The present study was delimited to 141 samples only.
3. The variables of the study were delimited to dependent variables like depression, and independent variables of gender, religion, stream of study, living arrangement, and habitat.

Hypotheses

The following hypotheses were formulated based on the aforementioned study objectives:

- **$H_0$1 -** Gender has no significant variation on depression of first-year undergraduate students.
- **$H_0$2 -** Religion has no significant variation on depression of first-year undergraduate students.
- **$H_0$3 -** Stream of study has no significant variation on depression of first-year undergraduate students.
- **$H_0$4 -** Living arrangement has no significant variation on depression of first-year undergraduate students.
- **$H_0$5 -** Habitat has no significant variation on depression of first-year undergraduate students.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

In order to achieve the study's objective, researchers utilised a cross-sectional survey framework. Survey studies are typically carried out to gather detailed descriptions of current phenomena in order to use the data to support current practices or to develop more informed plans for enhancing them. The survey research design was chosen as a suitable method for collecting data on the emotional and behavioural characteristics of the respondents within a short period of time.

Population and Sample

The population of the study consisted of all first-year undergraduate students of 2023-2024 academic session at Jadavpur University. A sample size of 141 students was selected from this university for the study. The researchers employed convenient sampling techniques to collect the data at their own pace and freedom.

Variables

The study identified depression as the dependent variable, while gender, religion, stream of study, living arrangement and habitat were identified as the independent variables. Here the independent variable depression was categorised into five levels of normal level, mild level, moderate level, severe level, extremely severe level. This categorisation was done following the Depression Anxiety Stress Scales (DASS-21) developed by Lovibond and Lovibond (1995). The gender has two categories namely, female and male. The religion has two categories namely, hindu and muslim. Stream of study has three categories namely, science, arts, and engineering. Living arrangement has two categories namely, with family and without family. Habitat has three categories namely, village, town, and metro city.

Tools

The data collection process involved the administration of a personal information schedule about the student developed by the present researchers and the Depression subscale from Depression Anxiety Stress Scales (DASS-21) developed by Lovibond and Lovibond in 1995. Data were analysed using SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences) version 26.0.

Descriptive Statistics

Prevalence of Depression Among First-Year Undergraduate Students

In Table 1, the crosstabulation of gender and depression revealed that among females, the highest count of individuals fell into the moderate depression category (20 individuals), followed by the normal and mild categories with 14 individuals each. The severe and extremely severe categories had counts of 11 and 7 individuals, respectively.

For males, the largest count was in the moderate depression category, with 25 individuals, followed by normal and severe categories with 23 and 10 individuals, respectively. The mild and extremely severe categories had counts of 13 and 4 individuals, respectively.

In the overall sample, the most prevalent depression level was moderate, with a total count of 45 individuals. Normal and mild depression levels had counts of 37 and 27 individuals, respectively, while severe and extremely severe levels had counts of 21 and 11 individuals, respectively. The grand total for the sample was 141 individuals.

In Table 2, the crosstabulation of religion and depression showed that among individuals identifying as Hindu, the most prevalent depression level was moderate, with a count of 35 individuals. This was followed by normal and mild depression levels, with counts of 32 and 21 individuals, respectively. Severe and extremely severe depression levels had counts of 17 and 9 individuals, respectively.

For individuals identifying as Muslim, the highest count was in the moderate depression category, with 9 individuals. Normal and mild depression levels had counts of 5 and 6 individuals, respectively. Severe and extremely severe depression levels had counts of 4 and 2 individuals, respectively.

Table 1: Gender and depression crosstabulation

			Depression					
			Normal	*Mild*	*Moderate*	*Severe*	*Extremely severe*	*Total*
Gender	Female	Count	14	14	20	11	7	66
		Expected count	17.3	12.6	21.1	9.8	5.1	66.0
	Male	Count	23	13	25	10	4	75
		Expected count	19.7	14.4	23.9	11.2	5.9	75.0
	Total	Count	37	27	45	21	11	141
		Expected count	37.0	27.0	45.0	21.0	11.0	141.0

Table 2: Religion and depression crosstabulation

			Depression				
			Normal	*Mild*	*Moderate*	*Severe*	*Extremely severe*
Religion	Hindu	Count	32	21	36	17	9
		Expected Count	30.2	22.0	36.7	17.1	9.0
	Muslim	Count	5	6	9	4	2
		Expected Count	6.8	5.0	8.3	3.9	2.0

In Table 3, the crosstabulation of stream and depression showed that among individuals in the science stream, the most prevalent depression level was normal, with a count of 22 individuals. Mild and moderate depression levels had counts of 6 and 15 individuals, respectively. Severe and extremely severe depression levels had counts of 11 and 3 individuals, respectively.

For individuals in the arts stream, the highest count was in the moderate depression category, with 18 individuals. Mild and severe depression levels had counts of 17 and 5 individuals, respectively. Normal and extremely severe depression levels had counts of 8 and 6 individuals, respectively.

Among individuals in the engineering stream, the most prevalent depression level was moderate, with a count of 12 individuals. Normal, mild, severe, and extremely severe depression levels had counts of 7, 4, 5, and 2 individuals, respectively.

In Table 4, the crosstabulation of living arrangement and depression showed that among individuals living with family, the most prevalent depression level was severe, with a count of 5 individuals. Normal, mild, moderate, and extremely severe depression levels had counts of 5, 4, 4, and 3 individuals, respectively.

For individuals living without family, the highest count was in the moderate depression category, with 41 individuals. Normal, mild, severe, and extremely severe depression levels had counts of 32, 23, 16, and 8 individuals, respectively.

In Table 5, the crosstabulation of habitat and depression revealed that among individuals from the village, the most prevalent depression level was normal, with a count of 21 individuals. Mild, moderate, severe, and extremely severe depression levels had counts of 6, 13, 10, and 6 individuals, respectively.

Table 3 : Stream and depression crosstabulation

			Depression				
			Normal	*Mild*	*Moderate*	*Severe*	*Extremely severe*
Stream	Science	Count	22	6	15	11	3
		Expected count	15.0	10.9	18.2	8.5	4.4
	Arts	Count	8	17	18	5	6
		Expected count	14.2	10.3	17.2	8.0	4.2
	Engineering	Count	7	4	12	5	2
		Expected count	7.9	5.7	9.6	4.5	2.3

Table 4 : Living arrangement and depression crosstabulation

			Depression				
			Normal	*Mild*	*Moderate*	*Severe*	*Extremely severe*
Living Arrangement	With family	Count	5	4	4	5	3
		Expected count	5.5	4.0	6.7	3.1	1.6
	Without family	Count	32	23	41	16	8
		Expected count	31.5	23.0	38.3	17.9	9.4

Table 5: Habitat and depression crosstabulation

			Depression				
			Normal	*Mild*	*Moderate*	*Severe*	*Extremely severe*
LHabitat	Village	Count	21	6	13	10	6
		Expected count	14.7	10.7	17.9	8.3	4.4
	Town	Count	7	10	18	7	4
		Expected count	12.1	8.8	14.7	6.9	3.6
	Metro City	Count	9	9	14	4	1
		Expected count	9.7	7.1	11.8	5.5	2.9

For individuals from the town, the highest count was in the moderate depression category, with 18 individuals. Mild, severe, and extremely severe depression levels had counts of 10, 7, and 4 individuals, respectively. Normal depression level had a count of 7 individuals.

Among individuals from the metro city, the most prevalent depression level was moderate, with a count of 14 individuals. Normal and mild depression levels had counts of 9 and 9 individuals, respectively. Severe and extremely severe depression levels had counts of 4 and 1 individuals, respectively.

Hypotheses Testing

$H_0$1 - Gender has no significant variation on depression of first-year undergraduate students.

Table 6: Chi-Square test to check association between gender and depression

	Value	*df*	*Asymptotic significance (2-sided)*
Pearson Chi-Square	3.086[a]	4	.544
Number of valid cases	141		

0 cells (0.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 5.15.

Table 6 revealed a Pearson chi-square value of 3.086 with 4 degrees of freedom. The asymptotic significance (2-sided) was calculated to be .544. Here, the p-value (.544) is greater than the conventional alpha level of .05. Hence, the null hypothesis $H_0$1 has been retained.

$H_0$2 - Religion has no significant variation on depression of first-year undergraduate students.

Table 7 revealed Fisher's Exact Test value of 4.730. The exact significance (2-sided) was calculated to be .960. Here, the p-value (.960) is greater than the conventional alpha level of .05. Hence, the null hypothesis $H_0$2 has been retained.

Table 7: Fisher's Exact Test to check association between religion and depression

	Value	*Exact significance (2-sided)*
Fisher's Exact test	4.730	.960
Number of valid cases	141	

$H_0$3 - Stream has no significant variation on depression of first-year undergraduate students.

Table 8: Fisher's Exact Test to check association between stream and depression

	Value	*Exact significance (2-sided)*
Fisher's Exact Test	16.909	.026
Number of valid cases	141	

Table 8 showed Fisher's Exact Test value of 16.909. The exact significance (2-sided) was calculated to be .026. Here, the p-value (.026) is lesser than the conventional alpha level of .05. Hence, the null hypothesis $H_0$3 has been rejected.

Table 9: Cramer's V Test to check strength of association between stream and depression

	Value	*Exact significance (2-sided)*
Cramer's V Test	.250	.025
Number of valid cases	141	

Table 9 showed Cramer's V Test value of .250. The approximate significance was calculated to be .025. Here, the p-value (.025) is lesser than the con-

ventional alpha level of .05. Hence, the strength of association is minor or small but significant.

$H_0$4 - Living arrangement has no significant variation on depression of first-year undergraduate students.

Table 10: Fisher's Exact Test to check association between living arrangement and depression

	Value	*Exact significance (2-sided)*
Fisher's Exact test	4.264	.362
Number of valid cases	141	

Table 10 revealed Fisher's Exact Test value of 4.264. The exact significance (2-sided) was calculated to be .362. Here, the p-value (.362) is greater than the conventional alpha level of .05. Hence, the null hypothesis $H_0$4 has been retained.

$H_0$5 - Habitat has no significant variation on depression of first-year undergraduate students.

Table 11: Fisher's Exact Test to check association between habitat and depression

	Value	*Exact significance (2-sided)*
Fisher's Exact test	21.951	.098
Number of valid cases	141	

Table 11 showed Fisher's Exact Test value of 21.951. The exact significance (2-sided) was calculated to be .098. Here, the p-value (.098) is greater than the conventional alpha level of .05. Hence, the null hypothesis $H_0$5 has been retained.

RESULTS

It was found from the analyses that in the overall sample, the largest count was in the moderate depression category. Naushad et al. (2014) found the same type of result from the college students of Mangalore city in India, where the majority of the sample fell in the category of moderate depression. In the case of gender, most of the females and males fell into the category of moderate depression. In the case of religion, both Hindus and Muslims mostly fell into the category of moderate depression. In the case of streams, both arts students and engineering students mostly fell into the category of moderate depression, whereas most of the science students fell into the normal depression category. In the case of living arrangements, most of the students living with their family had a severe level of depression, whereas students living without their family had a moderate level of depression. In the case of the habitat, both students from towns and metro cities mostly fell into the category of moderate depression, whereas most of the students from villages fell into the normal depression category. There is no significant association between gender and depression among first-year undergraduate students, and gender does not appear to be a significant predictor of depression in this population. There is no significant association between religion and depression among first-year undergraduate students, and religion does not appear to be a significant predictor of depression in this population. There is a minor but significant association between stream and depression among first-year undergraduate students. There is no significant association between living arrangement and depression among first-year undergraduate students, and living arrangement does not appear to be a significant predictor of depression in this population. There is no significant association between habitat and depression among first-year undergraduate students, and habitat does not appear to be a significant predictor of depression in this population.

DISCUSSION

As the students' progress through higher education, they face increased strain, making it challenging for them to maintain good mental health. Specifically, undergraduate students who enrol in their first-year courses at higher education institutions encounter numerous unfamiliar circumstances. Studies found that these fresh newcomers at higher education institutions often fall into depression and other mental health issues (Chen et al. 2022; Islam et al. 2022; Siripongpan et al. 2022). The present study also found the same kind of results regarding depression among first-year undergraduate students in a public university (namely Jadavpur University) in West Bengal. Asher BlackDeer (2023) conducted a study among undergraduate college students. The study revealed that female students exhibited a greater prevalence of depression than the male students, and the dif-

ference was statistically significant. The study by Martínez-Líbano et al. (2023) also revealed the same type of result regarding the prevalence of depression among male and female students at university level in post pandemic period. However, the current research showed that there was no statistically significant relationship between depression and gender of the first-year undergraduate students. The present research aimed to assess the prevalence of depression among first-year undergraduate students at Jadavpur University and identified that in the study sample, the majority of the students had a moderate degree of depression among them. The researchers of this study feel that the new academic and personal responsibilities may have some effects on the development of mild to severe depression among these entrant students. In the study sample, there were also an adequate number of students who were in the normal range of depression. In this case the researchers of the study feel that the novelty of the academic and personal life may have some positive motivational effects on them. The researchers have amalgamated a diverse array of studies to offer a comprehensive comprehension of the subject. Nevertheless, the essay would be enhanced by a more thorough examination of the constraints of current research. A lot of studies depend on self-reported data, which can be influenced by bias. Furthermore, the research does not address the possible influence of cultural variables on the occurrence and manifestation of depression among college students, which is a crucial aspect to consider when designing interventions.

CONCLUSION

The present research examined the depression among first-year undergraduate students in a public university in West Bengal in terms of some socio-demographic variables, namely gender, religion, stream, living arrangement and habitat. Most of the students were in the moderate depression category. However, there was no statistically significant relationship between depression and the previously mentioned socio-demographic variables except stream. The only statistically significant association existed was between stream and depression, though the strength of association was minor or small. The current study is not an end-research in this particular area of exploration. Hence, future researchers have the opportunity to conduct more investigations from other angles, incorporating diverse factors, employing innovative and reliable measurement instruments, increasing the sample size, and employing various statistical methods.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Depression among first-year undergraduate college students is a multifaceted problem affected by multiple factors. The university should increase the access to counselling, therapy, and support groups specifically tailored to address the issue of depression faced by the students. The university can incorporate orientation programmes for its students to handle their mental health issues. Government and non-government organisations should play their vital roles by taking various initiatives to deal with the university students' depression.

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