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Practice of Religion as a Predictor of Resilience and Thriving among University Students of Karachi

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Abstract

Stress has become a pervasive issue in modern times, increasingly affecting individuals' wellbeing. This highlights the importance of identifying protective factors that help individuals remain functional and productive during crises or daily stressors. Among many protective factors, there has been a plethora of literature favoring religion and its customs as an important anchor in a person's life. So, the purpose of the research was to study Practice of religion; both Public and Private, as important dimensions of religiosity that may result in better adaptation to stress (Resilience and Thriving) in University students of Karachi. To test this, it was hypothesized that Public practice and Private practice would have a predictive relationship with stress adaptation (resilience and thriving). Two hundred Muslim students which included 47 men and 153 women, aged 18-25 years (\bar{X} =21.33; SD =2.00), fulfilling the inclusion criteria were contacted online due to Covid-19 lockdown. A Google Doc form including Informed consent, Demographic sheet and the standardized scales was designed and sent to students from different universities of Karachi. Scales included were (i) Centrality of Religiosity Scale (CRS; Huber, S. & Huber, O., 2012), (ii) Brief Resilience Scale (Smith et al., 2008), and (iii) Brief Thriving Scale (Smith et al., 2023). Descriptive statistics, correlation and Regression were computed via SPSS (version 26.0) to explore the relationship of Public and Private Practice with Resilience and Thriving. Results indicated that public practice had a negative predictive relationship with Resilience, whereas it positively predicted Thriving. Moreover, Private practice predicted Thriving. In conclusion, university students often find themselves in a better state after facing stressors, instead of merely returning to their previous level of functioning when they choose practicing religion as a coping strategy.

Keywords: Religiosity, Public practice, Private practice, Stress management, Coping, Toughness, Flourishing

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1. Introduction

In the modern world, man is faced with a lot of challenges and conflicts on various levels. This affects a person's capability of adaptation and makes this question more relevant as to what factors affect this adaptation (Vasilenko et al., 2021). When people are faced with hardships, they seek refuge in whatever serves them the protection in crises. A variety of strategies are used by people to cope, for example, distraction, catharsis, seeking social support, humor, drug use, problem-solving etc. (Rammouz et al., 2023). Religion is one of the coping strategies which are highly used for stress adaptation (Lowicki et al., 2022; Swisher, 2015). Religion is an organized framework of customs, rites and beliefs aimed at developing a connection with a higher power (Koenig et al., 2012). Just like during the Covid-19 pandemic, religious activities grew rapidly all over the world due to the prevalent stress (Sahgal & Conaughton, 2021; Bentzen, 2020; Coyle, 2020). This is because religion has been found to be associated with health, happiness, mental well-being and life satisfaction (Baggaley et al., 2024; Gan et al., 2023; Javanmard, 2013). Long-living older adults and even in patients with severe illnesses, religion has found to improve their resilience and well-being (Maniyar et al., 2024; Reis & Menezes, 2017).

Research suggests that individuals who maintain a connection with their religion are often better equipped to draw on their inner strengths and resilience when facing stressors. For example, it is found that people are more religious tend to have higher emotional regulation skills which may help them overcome the stressor efficiently (Vishkin et al., 2019). So, religiosity serving as a protective factor is immensely researched and evidence favors this too (Rammouz et al., 2023). However, there have been some mixed reviews as well; where one side of literature reinforces that religion provides support to its believers and helps improve their subjective well-being, happiness and overall quality of life (Eatamadi & Napier, 2023; Ghannam & Gorey, 2022); there are some studies that state otherwise. According to certain studies, religion may exert a neurotic effect, potentially leading to negative impacts on well-being (Koenig et al., 2001). This means that sometimes, religion may serve as a buffer; other times it may pose a risk to sanity (Szalachowski & Tuszyńska-Bogucka, 2021; Vasilenko et al., 2021). Logically, certain components of religion may be beneficial, while others may not. This area is under active research, with studies

exploring various aspects of religion like beliefs, rituals, spiritual support, etc. to understand their distinct roles and effects.

Looking at essential components of religion, research shows that religion can serve as a coping strategy through beliefs and rituals along with individual as well as collective religious activities (Ouanes et al., 2021). Research also reinforces the Religion-Health Connection theory, given by Ellison and Levin in 1998. It suggests that both psychosocial and behavioral aspects of religion provide comfort to its believers (Ozeto & Allan, 2021). Focusing more on the behavioral aspects of religion, literature indicates that Practice of religion with its customs and rites has found to be associated with well-being, positive affect and giving people with a sense of purpose and belonging (Habib et al., 2018; Pederson et al., 2018). Javanmard (2013), believed that overt practice and rituals are the pillars of a religion as Islam provides its believers with a set of obligatory rituals (Nabi, 2024). So, the present study aims to investigate this essential dimension of religiosity, which is the practice of religion; both publically and private one. These practices serve as framework for the believer to navigate in the daily life, build comforting social interactions as well as help in redefining a stressor as God's will (Baggaley et al., 2024; Khan, 2019).

The outcome is just as important as the coping strategies used to manage the stressor. When individuals experience stress and employ coping strategies, Bruce Smith and his colleagues (2023) identify two main outcomes: *Resilience* and *Thriving*, collectively referred to as *stress adaptation*. Resilience can be seen as the ability to recover quickly from any mishap or setback (Javanmard, 2013). So, it is a coping strategy used for healthy adaption during crises (Reis & Menezes, 2017). Resilience can be viewed in two ways. First, it involves positive coping skills, such as actively addressing challenges, using faith to find purpose, and seeking emotional and social support. Second, it signifies the absence of negative traits like low self-esteem or risky behaviors that could harm physical or mental health (Langehough et al., 1997). In essence, resilience is the capacity to maintain typical developmental progress even during difficult times. Thriving, in contrast, is about emerging stronger after challenging experiences (Consoli et al., 2015). Carver (1998) distinguishes the two by defining resilience as the ability to return to a former level of functioning, whereas *thriving* refers to reaching a higher level of functioning

following adversity. Resilience plays a crucial role in alleviating negative mental health outcomes, such as anxiety and depression, while thriving is essential for enhancing positive mental health aspects, like life satisfaction and positive emotions. Thriving includes being energetic and lively along with a constant drive to grow (Sahin & Tuna, 2022). In addition to resilience, it is important to explore how individuals can grow and derive positive outcomes from stress experiences (Smith et al., 2017). This research aims to evaluate both resilience and thriving in the context of individuals using religious practices as a coping mechanism for stress. It would explore the causal links of the two dimensions of public practice and private practice of religion with resilience and thriving. It would help gain more insight into the multi-faceted concept of religion and if one is to use religion as a coping strategy, which dimension works best. It has been hypothesized Public Practice of Religion would have a predictive relationship with Resilience and Thriving. Private Practice of Religion would have a predictive relationship with Resilience and Thriving.

2. Method.

2.1 Research Design

The cross-sectional research design was used.

2.2 Sample

The present study involved a sample of Muslim participants. A total number of 200 university students from different public, private and semi-private universities became a part of the study; 47 men, 153 women, aged 18-25 years (\bar{X} =21.33; SD =2.00).

2.3 Instrument(s)

2.3.1 Centrality of Religiosity Scale (CRS; S. Huber, & O. Huber, 2012). It is a self-report tool to assess salience and importance of religion for a person. Participant is required to mark the items on a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from never to very often. Scoring can be done for the overall scale as well as the subscales. Two of its subscales were utilized for the study; Public practice and Private practice. This scale proved its validity and reliability (Zarzycka & Rydz, 2014). Moreover, the alpha score was found to be 0.82 for the present study.

2.3.2 Brief Resilience Scale (BRS; Smith et al., 2008). It is also a self-report instrument used to measure resilience. It contains six items and response is recorded on a 5-point Likert-scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly

agree. Furthermore, the alpha score for the present study was found to be 0.62.

2.3.3 Brief Thriving Scale (BTS; Smith et al., 2023).

This scale was used to measure thriving. It contains six items and response is recorded on a 5-point Likert-scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Furthermore, the alpha score was between .85 and .89 and test-retest reliability was .77.

2.4 Procedure

After the approval from the Advanced Studies and Research Board (ASRB), data was collected online due Covid-19 lockdown across the country. It was done via Google Doc form that contained informed consent, a basic demographic form and the standardized scales. Participants were thanked after completion and the data was then analyzed using SPSS. Demographics of participants like age, gender, religion, education, university name and perceived socio-economic status were taken.

2.5 Data Analysis

The data was analyzed used SPSS (version 26.0). Sample characteristics were analyzed using descriptive statistics and regression analysis was computed to explore relationship between Public and private practice of religion with Resilience and Thriving

2.6 Ethical Consideration

The APA ethical standards were followed to avoid any ethical violations during the study.

3. Results

Table 2 shows that public practice was a significant negative predictor of resilience ($R^2 = .030$, $F = 6.153$, $p < .05$) with a 3% variance; whereas it was a significant positive predictor of thriving ($R^2 = .022$, $F = 4.387$, $p < .05$) with a 2.2% variance. The results indicate that practicing the religion publically can improve a person's level of functioning after a mishap.

Table 3 shows that private practice was not a significant predictor of resilience ($R^2 = .000$, $F = .017$, $p > .05$); however, it was a significant predictor of thriving ($R^2 = .059$, $F = 12.036$, $p < .05$) with a variance of 5.9%. The results indicate that after encountering crisis, a person tends to function even better than before if religion is practiced privately.

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Demographics	F	%
Gender		
Men	47	23.5
Women	153	76.5
Marital status		
Single	183	91.5
Married	17	8.5
Socioeconomic status		
Lower	3	1.5
Middle	181	90.5
Upper	16	8

Note. N=200.

Table 2

The effects of Public Practice on Resilience and Thriving

	Resilience			Thriving		
	B	SEB	B	B	SEB	B
Public P	-.704	.284	-.174*	.654	.312	.147*
R ²			.030			.022
ΔR ²			.030			.022
F			6.153*			4.387*

Note. Public P= Public Practice. N=200, $p < .05^*$

Table 3

The effects of Private Practice on Resilience and Thriving

	Resilience		Thriving			
	B	SEB	B	B	SEB	B
Private P	.043	.336	.009	1.254	.357	.242*
R ²			.000			.059
ΔR ²			.000			.059
F			.017			12.306*

Note. Private P= Private Practice. N=200, $p < .05^*$

4. Discussion

The study examined how both public and private religious practices affect resilience and thriving, focusing on variations in religiosity rather than a simple religious/non-religious distinction (El-Menouar, 2014). Findings indicated that thriving was positively associated with public religious practices, while resilience showed a negative relationship with public practice.

The positive link between public religious practice and thriving suggests that engaging with religious communities may enhance individuals' ability to grow and improve their functioning after challenges. This participation likely provides emotional and social support, contributing to a sense of belonging and purpose,

which may foster thriving. VanderWeele (2017) indicated that religious communities are a crucial contributor to human thriving and flourishing. Recent researches also validate that attending religious activities, whether organized or non-organized, they result in improved mental health (Rammouz et al., 2023). During stress, individuals may withdraw socially, often feeling fatigued by interactions. Emile Durkheim's work on suicide (1897), highlights that those with lower levels of social integration are at a greater risk of suicide. This social withdrawal limits access to crucial social support, which is a protective factor in coping with stress, underscoring the importance of maintaining connections for mental resilience. According to Gan and his colleagues (2023), social support leads to better stress adaptation by increasing resilience (Revens et al., 2021), and positive mindset attained from these religious affiliations (Roger & Hatala, 2018). Research also highlights that support from religious communities is linked to lower depression rates (Harper et al., 2016). Huber and Huber (2012) explain that social support aids stress adaptation in two ways. First, it helps by reframing stress: knowing support is available makes challenges feel less overwhelming, boosting self-efficacy. Krause (2006) describes *anticipated social support*, or the belief that help is accessible if needed. Second, social support reduces the impact of stress by providing tangible assistance during and after stressful events. So, this emotional and tangible help counts a lot in dealing with stressors. Moreover, apart from social support, it also gives people chance to make new friends and marriage prospects (Vander Weele, 2017).

Additionally, religious gatherings often serve as a psychological refuge from everyday stressors. This type of religious involvement, offering unique psychological resources, can diminish or counteract the harmful effects of stress (Schieman et al., 2013). This impact stems from the spiritual guidance shared in these gatherings, where teachings encourage reliance on higher forces and reinforce beliefs like "everything happens for a reason," helping to reduce feelings of helplessness (Baggaley et al., 2024; Vasilenko et al., 2021). Finding meaning in adverse experiences can support more effective stress adaptation (Zhou et al., 2018). This effect may also arise because religious communities often promote forgiveness, which can aid in restoring relationships and reducing stress levels (VanderWeele, 2017).

The observed negative association between public religious practice and resilience may be partly due to how the study assessed religious attendance, such as Friday prayer frequency, adapted from measures of church attendance (Huber & Huber, 2012). For Muslims, mosque attendance is generally more common among men, and with 76.5% female participants, this could influence the findings (El-Menouar, 2014). Additionally, Islamic devotion is not tied to mosque attendance; Muslims maintain a direct connection with Allah without needing a mosque or religious leader to mediate their worship.

While most evidence highlights the protective benefits of religious communities and participation, some studies suggest potential downsides (VanderWeele, 2017). For instance, Pargament et al. (2004) found that certain spiritual efforts were linked to poorer health outcomes. Negative interactions within religious groups are also associated with lower well-being (Ellison et al., 2009). This can be especially harmful in religious settings, where people seek peace and support; issues like sectarian differences, judgmental attitudes, and privacy invasions may increase stress and adversely affect mental health (Ellison et al., 2010).

The other dimension, Private practice was found to be a significant predictor of thriving only. This suggests that these practices may enhance an individual's capacity to adapt to stress and improve their overall well-being following challenging experiences.

According to Swisher (2015), a major predictor of stress adaptation is fulfillment of prayers and this type of private religious practice like prayer can positively influence a person's life in four key ways: (1) it facilitates a personal relationship with the Divine, (2) it fosters hope, meaning, and purpose, (3) it enhances self-perception and positive self-assessment, and (4) it provides temporary relief from negative emotions (Schieman et al., 2013). Regular communication with the Divine through prayer contributes to a more coherent understanding of the world. In a research, improvement in optimism and spiritual experiences serves as a mediator between the frequency of prayer and mental well-being (Albatnuni & Koszycki, 2020). Furthermore, the belief that God responds to prayers is linked to improved self-esteem and enhanced ability to cope with stress (Krause, 2003). All in all, prayers are found to be associated with happiness and satisfaction; improving discipline and lowers

unhealthy coping strategies (Koenig & Al Shoaib, 2019; Najam et al., 2019).

"Verily in the remembrance of Allah do hearts find tranquility." (*Al-Quran* 13:28)

For Muslims, the obligatory prayers, performed five times daily, establish a continuous connection with Allah. This consistent engagement can reinforce the positive aspects of prayer in a person's mind. Rhonda Byrne's book *The Secret* (2011) suggests that one's predominant thoughts shape reality, aligning with the idea that if prayer provides solace and emotional expression, it fosters peace and helps individuals move beyond stressors. Husain (1998) also notes that focusing on prayer can distract the mind from pain perception. In addition to that, if we take a CBT approach linking the thoughts, emotions and behaviors, a prayer can help a person in two ways. Firstly, it would provide a basis for guiding what meanings a person would assign to the events, that is, redefining the stressors. Secondly, the meditative nature of the prayers make a person focus more on the Higher power rather than self-focused worry and rumination (Baggaley et al., 2024).

Conclusion

Present research has established causal links between both public and private religious practices and the concepts of resilience and thriving. It is also emphasized that religiosity is not merely a binary state but a multifaceted construct, where individuals may excel in one dimension while neglecting others. This complexity highlights the varying ways in which people experience and practice their religious beliefs in order to adapt to stress.

Limitations and Future Work

A self-report measure can undermine the purpose of the research, considering religiosity as a sensitive topic; a response bias could exist and confound the study. Future researchers can use mixed designs and implicit or indirect measurements, like reports from family, friends etc. (Hill & Maltby, 2009). Additionally, other scales to measure religiosity as a multi-faceted construct can be used in future work that are not gender biased like in the present study CRS had 'the Friday prayer' item which is usually for men.

Moreover, mediation and moderation analysis can enhance the findings of the study by adding other variables that may affect the relationship of religious practices with resilience and thriving.

Implications

The findings of the study have implications for research as well as they hold significance for the domains of education and therapy. It is important to devise strategies on how to engage children in the practice of religion so they can thrive after being exposed to stressors and improve their stress adaptation. Same goes for the therapeutic field, where religious practices may enhance a person's ability to bounce back and they may function even better than before rather than succumbing to stress.

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