

Research Paper

Depression, Anxiety and Stress among Undergraduate Students in Bankura District, West Bengal: Associations with Gender and Educational Stream

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ABSTRACT

The present study examined the levels of depression, anxiety, and stress among undergraduate students in Bankura District, West Bengal, and their associations with gender and educational stream. A quantitative descriptive cross-sectional survey design was adopted with a sample of 230 students selected from three colleges. Data were collected using the Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scale-21 (DASS-21) and analysed through frequency, percentage, mean, standard deviation, and Pearson's Chi-square test. The findings revealed that 73.48% of students experienced some level of depression, 76.52% anxiety, and 67.39% stress. Gender showed no significant association with any of the three dimensions. Educational stream was significantly associated with depression, with science students showing a higher proportion of extremely severe depression than Arts students, while no significant associations were found for anxiety or stress.

Keywords: *Depression, Anxiety, Stress, Undergraduate Students*

Mental health is an essential component of overall well-being because it influences learning, decision-making, social relationships, productivity, and the ability to cope with everyday difficulties (World Health Organization, 2022; Henry & Crawford, 2005). Undergraduate education is a sensitive transitional stage during which students encounter increased academic workload, changing interpersonal relationships, financial difficulties, family expectations, career uncertainty, and pressure to achieve educational success (Iqbal et al., 2015; Chakraborty et al., 2024). When these demands exceed students' available coping resources, they may experience depression, anxiety, and stress—three interconnected but distinguishable dimensions of psychological distress (Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995; Henry & Crawford, 2005). Depression commonly involves persistent sadness, reduced motivation, hopelessness, and loss of interest, whereas anxiety is characterised by apprehension and physiological arousal, and stress is reflected through tension, irritability, impatience, and difficulty relaxing (Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995; Henry & Crawford, 2005). Prolonged psychological distress may adversely affect concentration, attendance, classroom participation, academic performance, sleep, social adjustment, and quality of life, thereby transforming student mental health from an individual problem into

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an important educational concern (Iqbal et al., 2015; Chakraborty et al., 2024). Studies conducted in India have demonstrated a substantial but varying prevalence of depression, anxiety, and stress among undergraduate students, suggesting that psychological outcomes may differ according to academic discipline, institutional environment, socioeconomic background, geographical location, and the instruments used for assessment (Iqbal et al., 2015; Chakraborty et al., 2024). For example, Iqbal et al. (2015) reported depression, anxiety, and stress among 51.3%, 66.9%, and 53.0% of medical undergraduates, respectively, whereas a Kolkata-based study recorded corresponding rates of 32.0%, 40.5%, and 13.5%, demonstrating considerable contextual variation (Chakraborty et al., 2024; Iqbal et al., 2015). The increasing integration of digital technology into higher education has introduced further challenges because the internet facilitates academic activities but excessive or uncontrolled use may disturb sleep, reduce meaningful social interaction, and intensify psychological strain (Roy et al., 2024; Chakraborty et al., 2024). Research among higher-education students in West Bengal established a significant positive relationship between internet addiction and mental stress and further indicated that students from rural areas experienced comparatively greater stress than their urban counterparts (Roy et al., 2024). Emotional abilities such as self-awareness, emotional regulation, self-control, and sociability may also influence students' capacity to manage academic and personal pressures, while these competencies can vary according to gender and sociocultural circumstances (Mandal et al., 2025; Henry & Crawford, 2005). Within Bankura District, students' mental health may be influenced by the combined effects of academic competition, rural or semi-rural residence, economic constraints, transportation difficulties, limited access to counselling, family expectations, digital dependence, and uncertainty regarding future employment (Roy et al., 2024; Mandal et al., 2025). Therefore, a systematic assessment of depression, anxiety, and stress among undergraduate students, together with an examination of their associations with gender and educational stream, is necessary for identifying vulnerable groups and developing context-sensitive institutional interventions in Bankura District (Chakraborty et al., 2024; Roy et al., 2024; Mandal et al., 2025).

Rationale of the Study

Mental health is essential to students' educational development because it influences their capacity to learn, maintain relationships, make decisions, and cope with personal and academic challenges (World Health Organization, 2022; Auerbach et al., 2018). Undergraduate students are particularly vulnerable because their transition to higher education involves increased academic demands, changing social relationships, financial concerns, career uncertainty, and growing expectations from families and institutions (Hunt & Eisenberg, 2010; Beiter et al., 2015; Bruffaerts et al., 2018). Psychological distress during this period may weaken concentration, reduce academic engagement, contribute to absenteeism, and negatively affect educational performance and quality of life (Bruffaerts et al., 2018; Beiter et al., 2015). Depression, anxiety, and stress are related but distinguishable psychological conditions; therefore, examining all three dimensions together provides a more comprehensive understanding of students' emotional well-being than assessing a single condition in isolation (Henry & Crawford, 2005; Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995). Indian research has reported a considerable prevalence of psychological distress among undergraduate students, particularly within demanding academic environments, but the magnitude of the problem differs substantially across samples and institutional settings (Iqbal et al., 2015; Dutta et al., 2023). A Kolkata-based investigation also identified depression, anxiety, and stress among medical students and interns, while finding that selected demographic and behavioural characteristics were associated with particular forms

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of psychological distress (Chakraborty et al., 2024; Iqbal et al., 2015). In addition, research conducted among higher-education students in West Bengal established a significant relationship between internet addiction and mental stress and reported comparatively greater stress among rural students (Roy et al., 2024). Emotional competence, including well-being, self-control, emotionality, and sociability, may further influence how students respond to academic and social pressures (Mandal et al., 2025; Roy et al., 2024). Existing studies also present inconsistent gender patterns, suggesting that psychological distress cannot be adequately understood through gender alone and may be shaped by the interaction of personal, academic, social, and cultural conditions (Chakraborty et al., 2024; Iqbal et al., 2015; Mandal et al., 2025). Previous evidence further indicates that the prevalence and correlates of depression, anxiety, and stress vary across educational environments, which limits the direct generalisation of findings from medical colleges, metropolitan institutions, or other countries to general undergraduate populations (Bayram & Bilgel, 2008; Beiter et al., 2015). Despite increasing attention to student mental health, district-specific evidence concerning undergraduate students in Bankura remains limited, particularly regarding possible variations according to gender and educational stream (Chakraborty et al., 2024; Roy et al., 2024). Consequently, the present study is necessary to determine the levels of depression, anxiety, and stress and examine their associations with gender and educational stream, thereby providing locally relevant evidence for screening, counselling, and preventive mental-health programmes in undergraduate institutions (Henry & Crawford, 2005; Roy et al., 2024).

Delimitations of the study

- i) The study was delimited to only one district, i.e., Bankura, West Bengal.
- ii) The study was restricted to 230 undergraduate students.
- iii) The study was delimited to only 3 colleges, i.e., Bankura Sammilani College, Bankura Christian College, and Barjora College in Bankura district.
- iv) The study focused on three dependent variables, namely depression, anxiety, and stress, among undergraduate students. The independent variables considered in the study were gender and educational stream.
- v) With regard to educational stream, the study was confined to students belonging to the Arts and Science streams.

Objectives of the Study

1. To determine the distribution of undergraduate students across different levels of depression.
2. To determine the distribution of undergraduate students across different levels of anxiety.
3. To determine the distribution of undergraduate students across different levels of stress.
4. To examine the association between gender and the levels of depression, anxiety, and stress among undergraduate students.
5. To examine the association between educational stream and the levels of depression, anxiety, and stress among undergraduate students.

Null Hypotheses

- **H_{01(a)}:** There is no statistically significant association between gender and depression levels among undergraduate students.

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- **H_{01(b)}**: There is no statistically significant association between gender and anxiety levels among undergraduate students.
- **H_{01(c)}**: There is no statistically significant association between gender and stress levels among undergraduate students.
- **H_{02(a)}**: There is no statistically significant association between educational stream and depression levels among undergraduate students.
- **H_{02(b)}**: There is no statistically significant association between educational stream and anxiety levels among undergraduate students.
- **H_{02(c)}**: There is no statistically significant association between educational stream and stress levels among undergraduate students.

METHOD

The present study was undertaken to examine the status and levels of depression, anxiety, and stress among undergraduate students in Bankura district, West Bengal. A quantitative research approach with a descriptive cross-sectional survey design was employed. The target population comprised undergraduate students enrolled in colleges in Bankura district. A sample of 230 undergraduate students was selected from three colleges. The colleges were chosen purposively, whereas students were selected through simple random sampling. Gender and educational stream were considered as independent variables, while depression, anxiety, and stress were treated as dependent variables.

Tools Used for Data Collection

Data were collected using the **Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scale-21 (DASS-21)** developed by Lovibond and Lovibond (1995). The DASS-21 consists of 21 items distributed equally across three subscales- Depression, Anxiety, and Stress- with seven items representing each dimension. Each item is rated on a four-point scale ranging from 0 to 3 based on the respondent's experiences during the preceding week. Following the standard scoring procedure of the DASS-21, the raw scores obtained for each of the three subscales were multiplied by 2 to make them comparable with the scores of the original 42-item DASS and to determine the corresponding severity levels. The instrument was used to assess the severity levels of depression, anxiety, and stress among the participating undergraduate students. The obtained data were subsequently analysed using appropriate statistical techniques to examine differences across the selected independent variables.

Table 1. Severity Classification of Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scores According to DASS-21

Severity Level	Depression	Anxiety	Stress
Normal	0-9	0-7	0-14
Mild	10-13	8-9	15-18
Moderate	14-20	10-14	19-25
Severe	21-27	15-19	26-33
Extremely Severe	28+	20+	34+

Note: The raw scores obtained for each DASS-21 subscale were multiplied by 2, and the resulting scores were classified into Normal, Mild, Moderate, Severe, and Extremely Severe categories according to the recommended DASS severity cut-off scores.

RESULTS

The findings of the study are presented in accordance with the objectives and null hypotheses formulated for the investigation. Data obtained from 230 undergraduate students

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were analysed using frequency, percentage, mean, standard deviation, and Pearson's Chi-square test to examine the levels of depression, anxiety, and stress and their associations with gender and educational stream.

Table 2. Demographic Distribution of the Participants

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	108	46.96
	Female	122	53.04
Educational stream	Arts	129	56.09
	Science	101	43.91
Total		230	100.00

Interpretation

The study included 230 undergraduate students. Female students constituted 53.04% of the sample, while male students accounted for 46.96%. Regarding educational stream, 56.09% belonged to the Arts stream and 43.91% belonged to the Science stream. Thus, both gender and educational-stream groups were adequately represented in the sample.

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics of DASS-21 scores

DASS-21 dimension	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard deviation
Depression	230	0	42	17.37	10.93
Anxiety	230	0	42	16.26	10.22
Stress	230	0	42	19.49	9.60

Interpretation

Scores for all three dimensions ranged from 0 to 42. The mean score was highest for stress ($M = 19.49$, $SD = 9.60$), followed by depression ($M = 17.37$, $SD = 10.93$) and anxiety ($M = 16.26$, $SD = 10.22$). However, the severity of the three dimensions should be interpreted using their respective DASS-21 cut-offs rather than comparing the mean scores alone.

Table 4. Distribution According to Depression, Anxiety and Stress Levels

Dimension	Level	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Depression	Normal	61	26.52
	Mild	23	10.00
	Moderate	61	26.52
	Severe	37	16.09
	Extremely Severe	48	20.87
Anxiety	Normal	54	23.48
	Mild	7	3.04
	Moderate	52	22.61
	Severe	28	12.17
	Extremely Severe	89	38.70
Stress	Normal	75	32.61
	Mild	39	16.96
	Moderate	46	20.00
	Severe	54	23.48
	Extremely Severe	16	6.96
Each dimension	Total	230	100.00

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Interpretation

For depression, equal proportions of students were classified within the normal and moderate categories (26.52% each), while 20.87% recorded extremely severe symptoms. Overall, 73.48% were outside the normal depression range.

For anxiety, the extremely severe category contained the largest proportion of students (38.70%). Only 23.48% were within the normal range, meaning that 76.52% showed some degree of anxiety symptoms.

Stress displayed a comparatively different pattern. The normal category was the largest (32.61%), followed by severe stress (23.48%) and moderate stress (20.00%). Nevertheless, 67.39% of the students were classified outside the normal stress range. These categories describe reported symptom severity and should not be interpreted as clinical diagnoses.

Gender-wise Analysis

Table 5. Gender-wise Distribution of Depression, Anxiety and Stress Levels

Dimension	Level	Male, n (%)	Female, n (%)	Total
Depression	Normal	25 (23.15)	36 (29.51)	61
	Mild	8 (7.41)	15 (12.30)	23
	Moderate	27 (25.00)	34 (27.87)	61
	Severe	17 (15.74)	20 (16.39)	37
	Extremely Severe	31 (28.70)	17 (13.93)	48
Anxiety	Normal	20 (18.52)	34 (27.87)	54
	Mild	4 (3.70)	3 (2.46)	7
	Moderate	19 (17.59)	33 (27.05)	52
	Severe	13 (12.04)	15 (12.30)	28
	Extremely Severe	52 (48.15)	37 (30.33)	89
Stress	Normal	31 (28.70)	44 (36.07)	75
	Mild	22 (20.37)	17 (13.93)	39
	Moderate	17 (15.74)	29 (23.77)	46
	Severe	31 (28.70)	23 (18.85)	54
	Extremely Severe	7 (6.48)	9 (7.38)	16
Total for each dimension		108 (100.00)	122 (100.00)	230

Table 6. Association Between Gender and DASS-21 Levels

Hypothesis	Dimension	Pearson χ^2	df	p-value	Decision
H ₀₁ (a)	Depression	8.423	4	0.077	Failed to reject/ Retained
H ₀₁ (b)	Anxiety	9.395	4	0.052	Failed to reject/ Retained
H ₀₁ (c)	Stress	6.632	4	0.157	Failed to reject/ Retained

Interpretation

Male students showed higher proportions of extremely severe depression (28.70%) and extremely severe anxiety (48.15%) than female students. Female students had comparatively higher representation in the normal categories of depression, anxiety and stress. However, the observed differences did not reach the .05 significance level.

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Gender was not significantly associated with depression, $\chi^2(4, N = 230) = 8.423$, $p = .077$; anxiety, $\chi^2(4, N = 230) = 9.395$, $p = .052$; or stress, $\chi^2(4, N = 230) = 6.632$, $p = .157$. Therefore, **H₀₁(a), H₀₁(b), and H₀₁(c) were not rejected**. Although the anxiety result was close to .05, it must still be interpreted as statistically non-significant.

For the anxiety analysis, two cells (20%) had expected frequencies below 5, with a minimum expected count of 3.29. This is at the conventional permissible boundary and should be acknowledged when reporting the result.

Educational-Stream-wise Analysis

Table 7. Educational-Stream-wise Distribution of DASS-21 Levels

Dimension	Level	Arts, n (%)	Science, n (%)	Total
Depression	Normal	43 (33.33)	18 (17.82)	61
	Mild	14 (10.85)	9 (8.91)	23
	Moderate	33 (25.58)	28 (27.72)	61
	Severe	22 (17.05)	15 (14.85)	37
	Extremely Severe	17 (13.18)	31 (30.69)	48
Anxiety	Normal	36 (27.91)	18 (17.82)	54
	Mild	4 (3.10)	3 (2.97)	7
	Moderate	28 (21.71)	24 (23.76)	52
	Severe	18 (13.95)	10 (9.90)	28
	Extremely Severe	43 (33.33)	46 (45.54)	89
Stress	Normal	48 (37.21)	27 (26.73)	75
	Mild	23 (17.83)	16 (15.84)	39
	Moderate	24 (18.60)	22 (21.78)	46
	Severe	29 (22.48)	25 (24.75)	54
	Extremely Severe	5 (3.88)	11 (10.89)	16
Total for each dimension		129 (100.00)	101 (100.00)	230

Table 8. Association Between Educational Stream and DASS-21 Levels

Hypothesis	Dimension	Pearson χ^2	df	p-value	Decision
H ₀₂ (a)	Depression	13.948	4	.007	Rejected
H ₀₂ (b)	Anxiety	5.510	4	.239	Failed to reject/ Retained
H ₀₂ (c)	Stress	6.457	4	.168	Failed to reject/ Retained

Interpretation

Educational stream was significantly associated with depression level, $\chi^2(4, N = 230) = 13.948$, $p = .007$. The extremely severe depression category included 30.69% of science students compared with 13.18% of Arts students. Conversely, 33.33% of Arts students were within the normal depression range compared with 17.82% of science students. Accordingly, **H₀₂(a) was rejected**.

Educational stream was not significantly associated with anxiety, $\chi^2(4, N = 230) = 5.510$, $p = .239$, or stress, $\chi^2(4, N = 230) = 6.457$, $p = .168$. Therefore, **H₀₂(b) and H₀₂(c) were not rejected**.

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In the anxiety analysis, two cells (20%) had expected frequencies below 5, and the minimum expected frequency was 3.07. The result remains usable under the commonly applied rule, but the condition should be reported transparently.

Major Findings of the Study

The study revealed a substantial burden of psychological distress among undergraduate students, with 73.48% reporting some level of depression, 76.52% experiencing anxiety, and 67.39% exhibiting stress symptoms. Extremely severe anxiety was the most prominent category (38.70%), while 20.87% experienced extremely severe depression and 23.48% reported severe stress. Although male students showed comparatively higher proportions of extremely severe depression and anxiety than female students, gender was not significantly associated with depression, anxiety, or stress; consequently, all three gender-related null hypotheses were retained. Educational stream, however, was significantly associated with depression level, with science students displaying a considerably higher proportion of extremely severe depression than Arts students (30.69% versus 13.18%). No statistically significant associations were identified between educational stream and either anxiety or stress. Overall, the findings indicate that depression, anxiety, and stress were widespread among the participants, while educational stream emerged as a relevant factor specifically in relation to depression severity.

DISCUSSION

The present study revealed a high level of psychological distress among undergraduate students, as 73.48% reported some degree of depression, 76.52% experienced anxiety, and 67.39% exhibited stress symptoms; extremely severe anxiety was particularly prominent (38.70%). This general pattern is consistent with Iqbal et al. (2015), who found that depression, anxiety, and stress affected 51.3%, 66.9%, and 53.0% of medical undergraduates, respectively, with anxiety being the most prevalent condition. Nevertheless, the rates observed in the present study were considerably higher. They were also higher than those reported by Chakraborty et al. (2024) among medical students and interns in Kolkata, where the corresponding prevalence rates were 32.0%, 40.5%, and 13.5%. Such differences may have arisen from variations in participants' academic backgrounds, institutional support, socioeconomic circumstances, study periods, and exposure to personal and academic stressors. The present study found no statistically significant association of gender with depression, anxiety, or stress, although male students displayed comparatively higher proportions of extremely severe depression and anxiety. This result differs from Chakraborty et al. (2024), who observed significant gender associations with anxiety and stress, and from Iqbal et al. (2015), who reported higher psychological-distress scores among female students. However, Mandal et al. (2025) found that male undergraduate students in Jhargram scored significantly higher in well-being, self-control, emotionality, and overall emotional intelligence, while no significant gender difference occurred in sociability. These mixed findings suggest that gender alone may not consistently determine students' mental-health outcomes; instead, its influence may depend on emotional competence, coping strategies, family environment, academic expectations, and the surrounding sociocultural context.

A particularly important finding was the significant association between educational stream and depression, with extremely severe depression occurring among 30.69% of science students compared with 13.18% of Arts students; however, educational stream was not significantly related to anxiety or stress. The higher depression severity among science students may reflect the comparatively structured curriculum, intensive practical work,

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frequent examinations, pressure to attain high marks, and competition for limited professional and postgraduate opportunities. In the Bankura context, these academic pressures may be compounded by rural or semi-rural residence, financial limitations, lengthy travel to institutions, restricted access to specialised counselling, uncertainty regarding employment, and strong family expectations surrounding educational success. Roy et al. (2024), in a study of higher-education students from West Bengal, similarly found that rural students experienced significantly greater mental stress than their urban counterparts and that internet addiction was significantly related to psychological stress, indicating that geographical and digital circumstances may intensify students' vulnerability. Nevertheless, the present stream-related difference should not be interpreted as evidence that studying Science directly causes depression. Factors not examined in the study- such as socioeconomic status, place of residence, academic performance, sleep quality, internet use, family pressure, and career aspirations- may partly account for the observed association. The findings therefore highlight the need for regular mental-health screening, accessible counselling, career guidance, peer-support programmes, and stream-sensitive interventions in undergraduate institutions across Bankura.

Educational Implications

The findings indicate that higher-education institutions should introduce periodic mental-health screening, confidential counselling, peer-support groups, stress-management workshops, career guidance, and digital-well-being programmes. Although such support should be available to all students, additional attention may be given to science students because of their comparatively greater depression severity. Teachers should also be trained to recognise early signs of emotional distress and refer vulnerable students for appropriate assistance. Gender-sensitive emotional-development activities may strengthen students' self-awareness, emotional regulation, and interpersonal competence (Mandal et al., 2025), while interventions should also consider students' geographical and socioeconomic circumstances (Roy et al., 2024).

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that depression, anxiety, and stress were widespread among the undergraduate students surveyed in Bankura District, with anxiety emerging as the most prevalent form of psychological distress. Gender was not significantly associated with any of the three conditions, whereas educational stream was significantly associated only with depression, and Science students demonstrated greater severity. These findings emphasise the need for accessible, preventive, and context-sensitive mental-health support within undergraduate institutions.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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