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Silent Pressure: A Phenomenological Study of the Mental-Health Impact of Student Political Groups on Non-Political University Students in Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

This study explored how non-political university students experience and relate to the presence of student political groups on their campus, with particular attention to their mental health and well-being. While scholarship on campus politics in Pakistan is extensive, it has concentrated on political activists, leaving the large, largely silent non-political majority under-examined. This study, which took an interpretivist-phenomenological approach, interviewed 16 purposefully sampled, non-political university students from a public-sector university in Lahore by means of semi-structured interviews that were subsequently analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). It was underpinned by the spirality of silence, social identity theory, and the transactional model of stress and coping. A six theme set was generated, which reflected on implicit monitoring, self-censorship, compromised routines, stress and emotional suffering, diversified responses, and the need for neutral and safe environments. The researchers concluded that rather than explicit intimidation, perceived political threat materialises in self-imposed silent vigilance at the cost of self-expression, sense of belonging and university life. Neutrality needed to be safeguarded and confidential, depoliticized support service needs to be instituted.

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Introduction

Universities hold a unique position in any nation's intellectual and social life, acting as sites of learning and as battlefields on which competing ideas collide. Campus politics is one of the most evident manifestations of these conflicts-the fertile ground for leadership development, activism, and participation in democratic practice. The same characteristics of student politics that contribute to its capacity to organise, mobilise, elicit loyalty, and fuel rivalry can also be fertile grounds for intimidation, oppression, and violence.

When this potential for vibrance tips into an environment that feels oppressive, it is the whole of the student body who feel the effects.

In the Pakistani context, campus politics can be extremely volatile. Student groups serve as intermediaries and mobilising forces, shaping university cultures, influencing governance, and even determining campus dynamics. While providing community and purpose for the committed activist, this environment can simultaneously create what this paper terms "silent pressure" for the non-political student who makes up the numerical majority. These non-political students do not experience open threats and explicit intimidation, but they do anticipate negative outcomes from becoming entangled, instinctively hesitate to challenge prevailing currents, feel passively observed, and feel uneasy about being drawn into conflicts they have no part in initiating.

This study seeks to explain and respond to "silent pressure" by examining how non-political students experience and cope with the presence of student political organisations on university campuses, and how the pressure to participate-or fear of non-participation-affects their mental health and well-being.

The conventional scholarship on Pakistani university campuses has typically focused on the issues of polarisation, intimidation, disruption, and violence. However, these discussions often implicitly foreground the role of visibly active participants and treat non-political students largely as the context or the background (Hussain & Asad, 2021; Khalid & Shahid, 2020). As universities are Increasingly responsible for the welfare of a vast, diverse student population, neglecting the experience of the non-political majority who work, study, and socialise on campuses offers a partial understanding of the politics of the university.

The current study redresses this research gap by centering the experience of non-political students in the research. Its four specific objectives were to: explore the experiences of non-political students with student political groups; assess the psychological and emotional impact of these groups on non-political students; investigate student strategies for coping with silent pressure; and propose recommendations for universities to support student well-being. The central research question asked how non-political students perceive and navigate the dynamics of student political organizations and what consequences those dynamics have for student well-being.

This inquiry is significant in four interrelated ways.

It fills a gap in the research by engaging the experience of a numerical majority of student who deliberately do not participate politically; extending, thus, the field's scope beyond explicitly activist populations. It makes a policy contribution by drawing the concerns of uninvolved students into conversations dominated by discussions of campus violence, disruption and security; informing the campus-based mental health interventions. It generates actionable advice for administrators and campus services based on insights drawn directly from students themselves. And it enhances mental-health understanding and public discourse by articulating phenomena that too often occur in isolation, in the silence.

Literature Review

Students' politics has long played a prominent role in the history of Pakistan. By the 1960s, organised student bodies were influential players in national movements and were modelling democratic behavior (Saeed & Zafar, 2018). The ban on student unions in 1984 had the effect of

transforming, rather than ending student political engagement: with no elected accountable structures in place on campuses, student wings of national parties and movements gained prominence, often engaging in intimidation and, in several instances, violence (Khalid & Shahid, 2020). Current scholarship is therefore concerned with polarisation, intimidation, and disruption (Hussain & Asad, 2021), but typically in terms of the perspective of the actively engaged politically, rather than of those on the margins.

Social-psychological literature on conformity, peer pressure, and group dominance offers a conceptual basis to explore how politicized environments might exert indirect but powerful pressures on students not actively involved in group politics (Asch, 1956; Naeem & Yousaf, 2019). The influence exerted need not always be explicit: awareness of the dominant position of the opposing groups and of the potential costs of expressing contrary views can be enough to cause students to avoid comment. A related and expanding literature shows that student well-being and mental health is impacted by the social environment in which they study, and not simply by academic performance alone (Misra & Castillo, 2004; World Health Organization, 2022); in this, it draws on work on widespread distress among students in lower- and middle-income contexts (Akhtar et al., 2020).

The conceptual framework for this research draws on three major strands of literature. The first of these, Noelle-Neumann's (1974) spiral of silence, explains that people with views they perceive to be in the minority will be less inclined to express themselves openly for fear of social isolation, thus increasing the apparent strength of dominant opinions. Tajfel and Turner's (1979) theory of social identity highlights the value that individuals derive from group membership – safety, support, a sense of belonging – and suggests, conversely, that deliberate non-alignment leaves one socially vulnerable. Finally, Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) transactional model of stress and coping provides a framework for understanding threat appraisal and coping strategy choices, such as the often reliance on emotion-focused avoidant coping strategies in the face of perceived lack of control.

Second, two additional literatures are relevant to this project. The literature on psychological safety, voice and belonging highlights that expression is contingent upon an environment where it does not risk retribution-exactly the context that, in many of the politicized campus settings described by our participants, is absent. Lastly, the extensive work on gender and vulnerability suggests that women may be affected in politicized contexts by particular issues of mobility, public visibility and social reputation, whereas male students may feel pressure to take up a cause or 'stand for something'. Collectively, these literatures point to the plausibility of negative mental health consequences for the silent non-participants in politics and the silence in accounts of those contexts about their experiences.

Research Methodology

Research was Situated within an Interpretivist Paradigm 5 7 -81 The research was situated within an interpretivist research paradigm where 'Social reality is viewed as a result of meanings negotiated in human activity and interaction'. (Guba & Lincoln, 1994:108). 7 As the focus was upon the lived meaning of 'silent pressure' rather than identifying frequency, a qualitative, phenomenological approach was utilised to investigate lived experience, specifically using interpretative phenomenology. 7 (Moustakas, 1994; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). The site was a large public-sector university in Lahore, chosen for its sizeable, diverse student body and well-documented history of active campus politics.

Consistent with phenomenological practice, sixteen non-political students were recruited through purposive sampling with maximum variation across faculty, level of study, and gender (Patton, 2015); the defining inclusion criterion was self-identification as non-affiliated with, and inactive in, any student political group. Sample size was governed by information richness rather than statistical power, and the researcher judged that by the fourteenth to sixteenth interview new

accounts were largely echoing established patterns. Participant characteristics are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: *Profile of Research Participants (N = 16)*

Attribute	Distribution
Gender	8 male, 8 female
Faculty / discipline	Humanities, Social Sciences, Natural Sciences, and Professional programmes
Level of study	BS / MSc / LLB / BBA / PharmD and M.Phil.
Age range	20–27 years

Note. Participants will be coded using pseudonyms P1 through P16. The name of the institution will not be included to maintain anonymity.

Data were gathered by way of in-depth, semi-structured interviews utilising a semi-flexible guide and supported by reflective field notes of perceived political atmosphere, emotions evoked, and impact on studying and safety; additionally, on coping mechanisms and desires for assist. Participants might respond in English or Urdu or each, with the researcher performing translations at the transcription stage. The guide was piloted with 2 college students outdoors the concluding sample.

Thematic analysis based mostly on Braun & Clarke's six phases (familiarisation, coding, searching for themes, reviewing, defining and reporting) 2006 was performed, regarded as a pro-active construction moderately than a dispassionate uncoverin g of themes.

Trustworthiness was approached utilizing Lincoln & Guba's standards; credibility (rapport, probing and member checking); transferability (thick description); dependability and confirmability (audit path and reflexive journal); and disciplined reflexivity. Ethiical approval was obtained prior to the fieldwork. The interviews had been voluntary and anonymous, guarded by informed consent.

Findings

A thematic analysis was also reflexive. It identified six themes, interconnected, charting movement in and out of the environment; beginning with a recognition of it and experiencing it then seeking to overcome and envision it as something different (Table 2). Themes were linked to and from other themes and most participants described several themes at any given time.

Table 2: *Themes and Sub-themes Identified from Data*

Theme	Sub-themes	Salience
1. Unspoken surveillance	Being watched and read; porousness of campus; rumour and reputation	High
2. Self-censorship	Guarding one's words; choosing silence; loss of authentic expression	Very high
3. Disruption and insecurity	Interrupted study; physical insecurity; the conditional campus	High
4. The emotional toll	Anxiety and dread; hypervigilance; exhaustion and numbing	High
5. Coping and resilience	Strategic invisibility; selective disclosure; reframing; humour	Very high
6. Desire for neutral, safe spaces	Protection of neutrality; calls for support; a different campus	Moderate–high

Note. Salience approximate popularity of each theme by the sixteen participants

An Atmosphere of Unspoken Surveillance

Almost all of the student subjects had felt some part of the same oppressive awareness that some portion of what they say, associate, or even refrain from saying will become available to political stakeholders-they didn't remember ever being awakened by some specific incident, rather, it was like the atmosphere they existed in. Said one psych major: You sort of scan the environment first before saying anything in the cafeteria. The awareness of other people listening; you really do sort of scan the environment before saying anything.

"You are always hypervigilant about the people around you and the context that you are in" (P4).

It included mundane choices, even location, as one recalled having been chastised for sitting "at the wrong table" and so, consequently, becoming "careful even about chairs" (P9). One student felt as though the "whole campus is an information sphere with no walls" (P13), in which casual remarks are amplified and become fixed in others' memories. Moreover, "just the sort of thing that you never know when the shit might hit the fan and just go crazy out of nowhere" (P10) provided the background hum of anxiety, the most arduous element, many reported.

Self-Censorship and the Withdrawal of Voice

Surveillance might be the most common way to 'view' the campus but self-censorship was probably its most long-lasting fallout – not a student in the research that had not, at some point in time, self-censored – so much so that some are unaware of performing it as an act of consciously curbing their output. In general, however, anything even vaguely political tends to be caught up in such self-censorship, one student explaining how he filtered "a comment that might be interpreted as political" by passing it through "a filter inside my head"; more often than not, no comment then materialised (P7). For some, the answer was simpler: "If somebody says something on a sensitive topic, I'll withdraw myself from the conversation...

There is evidence from other schools that this will result in me getting in trouble… The cost of having those thoughts expressed out loud is too high, and because of that I won't express anything… Because people who speak on controversial subjects have a tendency to be stereotyped as troublemakers; I don't want to be stereotyped," or as another put it, with remarkable clarity, "when

someone says something on a sensitive topic I will pull out my notebook...

I have thoughts on it... The price of having those thoughts out there is too steep. The assumption is that I am shy-the reality is that I am calculated quiet." (P15) There is the caution not even to post online, as one student admitted to "mostly posting on our chat about what is on course work and deadlines and shit; because of that I had, you know like, some of them take screenshots and send that to anyone, so I try to not post things on the chat that I do not need to." (P6) A loss of authenticity was perhaps the most profound impact: a student reading for political science admitted that, as a consequence of surveillance, he'd had to "learn to hide that interest, because curiosity is mistaken for alignment."

"I just find myself constantly Pretending to be someone I'm not" (P11).

Disrupted Academic Routines and a Pervasive Insecurity

Academic life was routinely penetrated by political activism, with lectures, exams and preparations punctuated by rallies, strike action, and clashes-most acutely in the run-up to exams. 'The problem,' noted P14, 'is when it spikes just before your exams - not on normal weeks. You can't tell your examiner you couldn't revise because the environment wasn't conducive to learning - you just take the hit.'

Few reported being directly injured or involved in the actual clashes, yet many experienced what could be called a 'low-level physical risk'; planning routes and avoiding specific areas, they spoke of how 'your heart sink[s]' when you hear distant trouble and that 'you shouldn't have to consider the politics just to go to your lecture'(P6).

'The relationship to the campus,'" recalled P16, "'isconditional, in that it feels like it's ours only so long as things aren't kicking off.'(P14).

The Emotional Toll

All this adds up to a particular, specific and emotional strain. Participants are strikingly consistent about this strain. One mentioned a low level, background anxiety as to whether people will feel "tension around me" when I'm working.

The tension "never switches off as much as it could.

My one bad day, I'm at home and can have it, and it helps me appreciate how exhausting it was. When I'm on campus I'm unaware of it" (P1). Another mentioned that "When I'm there, my shoulders tighten, I have afternoon headaches, and when I get back home at holidays the headaches go - and that's when I realised they're not about studying anyway" (P16). There is a common process of, as it were, " scanning" our environment and searching for traces of " tension"; one participant noticed she'd become "so jumpy" a friend remarked recently that she hadn't been so ' twitchy' in the past (P12); emotional and political costs accumulated and built up, as if one's system, for want of better term, numbs the unpleasant experiences to cope; an art and history student described as when he started at college being full of " zest" for things, by which time he had " been working to get through the day".

But the interesting point again is this: The " strain", for the students is not located on studies, but in their feeling to belong to space/ campus.

Their experience is more of having paid and continued paying the political, emotional cost of their engagement, as and not a side effects from the courses themselves.

Coping and Resilience Strategies

Individuals were not simply subjected to their surroundings; instead, they managed them strategically. Most commonly cited was a strategic elusiveness designed to be "forgotten"-an intentional attempt not to be memorable: 'I come and I attend and then I leave… it does work, but it does mean I've probably lost a lot about what university can be (P5)'. This was often a form of compartmentalisation involving judicious self-disclosure within a close few loyal friends-'those few genuine friendships have helped me to keep from going completely out of my mind' (P16), acceptance and cognitive redefinition-'this will be two years and then I will have gone; P8)', as well

as the use of humour as a coping strategy 'you've just got to be able to laugh at it to keep it out there and not too close; P10).

While adaptive, these behaviours did involve an implicit cost of missing out, of withholding information, of experiencing resigned self-withdrawal. The very viability of such strategies was in a perverse way evidence of the burden of the expectations from which they arose.

The Desire for Neutral, Safe Spaces

When asked to imagine a better future the aspirations of non-aligned students were strikingly uniform and uncomplicated; their decision to be apolitical should be respected and defended, not regarded with suspicion; accessible, strictly confidential, neutral support (counselling, staff, access paths) should be in place; the admin. Should be fair to everyone (even non-aligned). To quote one participant; "not an end to politics - just a safety net under it"." (P13).

Discussion

They converge on a central theme: among students who identify as apolitical, political pressure operates not through fear of open persecution, but through a climate of limited expression, weakened social belonging and subtly undermined welfare. The themes of surveillance and self-censorship, taken together, provide a tangible illustration of the spiral of silence (Noelle-Neumann, 1974). Believing that some voices in the university community were authoritative and perceiving the consequences of dissent as negative, students refrained from expressing their views; others followed suit and, as these perceptions gained support, the felt cost of dissent only increased.

The study thereby transports the spiral of silence from the macro level of publics to the micro level of direct social interaction in which fear of rejection is intensified by the group's continuous physical presence and confirms the conformist literature that here pressure is not direct and personal, but indirect, anticipating, and Self-directed (Asch, 1956; Naeem & Yousaf, 2019).

Social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) sheds light on the themes of insecurity and exclusion. By withholding affiliation, students placed themselves beyond the dominant in-groups of the political climate of campus and relinquished their security. In so doing, their neutrality (used to avoid entanglement) was perceived as inherently suspicious: This explains the „conditional" relationship with the campus. Emotionality and coping themes correspond closely to the model of stress and coping in the framework of Lazarus and Folkman (1984), assuming that the perception of the environment is perceived as threatening and unmanageable.

These themes are consistent with existing literature that indicates that individual (mental) well-being is to a large extent determined by factors within the society and institutions of education, and that it's not limited to individual or school related issues.

This is reflected by The report of psychological symptoms similar to Those experienced by chronic stressors (and with similar levels). But, in addition to highlighting these pathways from an institutional setting, in a more detailed examination of Students experiences: there was also variation and personalization of the climate described; for women, the feeling Of having already been the focus of attention, vulnerability or reputation compounded restrictions to their physical mobility, while men Felt a need to stand up and state their views, because non alignment as a weakness Could be perceived as not aligning. Despite the sample limitations, those pattern shows how silent Pressure is mediated by gender, discipline, circumstance etc., requiring Institutions to adopt corresponding flexibility approaches.

Conclusion

This thesis sought to make readable an experience of the overlooked: the experiences of the non-political student in a politicalised university. This thesis concludes that the well-being of the 'silent majority' is a genuine, separate and overlooked interest, and that the strains on them, although largely unobserved, is not unimportant to their education. There are two forms of silence

involved: both in the silencing of the students' speech, and in the passing over in silence, by a literature and institution, that are both focused on those who engage in politics.

The study does not condemn student political life; several participants valued political participation in principle. Its argument is rather that the right to take up political activity should be matched by an equally protected right not to, and that the health of a campus should be judged not only by the vibrancy of its political field but by the well-being of those who do not participate. A university that cannot offer its non-political students a basic floor of safety and belonging has fallen short of part of its core mission.

Recommendations

Two principles underlie these recommendations: that interventions should address the campus climate rather than only the suffering individual, since the pressure documented here is environmental in origin; and that measures should be realistic within the constraints of Pakistani universities. For universities and administrations, the study recommends establishing genuinely neutral, confidential support channels, including counselling staffed by personnel with no political affiliation; affirming and protecting, in policy and practice, the right of students to remain non-political; safeguarding the academic mission by minimising disruption to teaching and examinations; and cultivating inclusive, neutral spaces alongside the visible, even-handed presence of the administration as a protector of every student.

For policymakers and the higher-education sector, the well-being of the non-participating majority should be recognised as a legitimate criterion in debates about campus politics, alongside concerns of order and the prevention of violence, supported by sector-wide guidance on freedom of expression and neutral mental-health provision. Student-affairs practitioners and counsellors should attend to the signs of chronic, low-grade stress—anxiety, hypervigilance, withdrawal, and emotional flatness—and recognise that resilience may mask rather than resolve distress. Future research should extend the inquiry across multiple institutions, incorporate the perspectives of politically affiliated students and staff, employ longitudinal and mixed-methods designs, and evaluate the neutral support structures participants called for, ideally through participatory approaches that treat non-political students as partners rather than subjects.

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Ethics: Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional review board, and informed consent was obtained from all participants; all identifying details and the institution's name were withheld to protect confidentiality.

Data Availability: Since the issue is sensitive and confidentiality agreements have been signed with participants, interview data are not publicly available.

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