

## Relationship between Internalizing Mental Health Problems and the Psychological Well-Being of Students in Selected Private Universities in Kampala District, Uganda

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**ABSTRACT:-** This study explored the relationship between internalizing mental health problems and the psychological well-being of students in selected private universities in Kampala District, Uganda. Using a sample of 316 students, the research employed Pearson correlation analysis to assess the relationship between internalizing mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, and stress, and psychological well-being. The findings revealed a significant moderate negative correlation ( $r = -0.448$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), indicating that as internalizing mental health problems increased, students' psychological well-being significantly decreased. This was consistent with the Psychological Well-Being (PWB) theory, which emphasizes the adverse effects of mental health struggles on overall life satisfaction. The qualitative data gathered from interviews with students, counselors, and university staff further corroborated these results, highlighting the impact of anxiety, depression, and academic stress on students' emotional states, academic performance, and social interactions. Students frequently reported feeling isolated and overwhelmed, with many refraining from seeking help due to stigma or lack of awareness about available support services. The study concluded that internalizing mental health problems are inversely related to students' psychological well-being, necessitating comprehensive mental health support in university settings. Recommendations included enhancing counseling services, increasing mental health awareness, training faculty members to recognize mental health struggles, and creating peer support networks.

**Keywords:** internalizing mental health problems, psychological well-being, private universities, academic stress, depression, anxiety, and student support.

### I. Background of the study

Globally, internalizing mental health problems such as anxiety, depression, and emotional distress have become increasingly prevalent among young people, particularly university students. These mental health conditions are characterized by inward-directed symptoms including persistent sadness, excessive worry, withdrawal from social activities, and feelings of worthlessness. According to recent reports from The Lancet Psychiatry Commission, mental health disorders contribute approximately 45% to the global disease burden in individuals aged 10 to 24 years. Despite this alarming statistic, only about 2% of national health budgets are allocated to mental healthcare, highlighting a major gap between the demand for and availability of mental health services. The increasing mental health burden is attributed to a range of global challenges such as economic inequality between generations, overexposure to unregulated social media content, academic pressures, uncertainty in employment prospects, and the existential threat posed by climate change. These factors have contributed to heightened emotional vulnerability among students, prompting universities worldwide to explore innovative solutions like peer counselling, therapy animals, and on-campus wellness programs in an effort to support students' mental and emotional health.

In the African context, the mental health of young people, especially students, is a growing concern but remains under-prioritized. The region faces an acute shortage of mental health professionals and resources, making it

difficult to provide adequate care. For instance, in some African countries like Togo, the number of qualified psychiatrists is extremely limited, with as few as five professionals serving entire national populations. In response, community-based strategies such as training informal providers, including hairdressers and community leaders, in basic psychosocial support have been introduced. Furthermore, Africa's vulnerability to climate-induced disasters like droughts, floods, and famines has led to an increase in trauma-related psychological conditions, especially among the youth. However, mental health services remain underrepresented in national and regional disaster preparedness and response strategies. The combination of limited access to healthcare, entrenched cultural stigmas surrounding mental illness, and the effects of economic instability has left many African students vulnerable to internalizing disorders, which can significantly impair their psychological well-being and academic performance.

In Uganda, mental health issues have also become increasingly prominent. A recent study conducted by Makerere University School of Public Health in collaboration with Butabika National Referral Mental Hospital revealed that approximately 30% of Ugandans suffer from a mental disorder. This statistic suggests that nearly one in every three Ugandans is battling mental health challenges. The leading contributors to poor mental health in the country include substance abuse, domestic violence, unemployment, poverty, and chronic stress related to school, work, and personal relationships. The situation was further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, during which access to mental health services was severely disrupted as several psychiatric units in public hospitals were repurposed to manage COVID-19 patients. As a result, individuals experiencing internalizing mental health problems often failed to receive timely care, leading to a deterioration in their psychological well-being. Among students, the effects of such stressors are profound, with many reporting feelings of hopelessness, academic burnout, and social withdrawal, all of which impact their overall academic and personal development.

Specifically in Kampala District, the capital and urban hub of Uganda, students enrolled in private universities face unique mental health challenges that require urgent attention. Academic pressures, financial constraints, and the competitive urban lifestyle contribute to elevated stress levels among university students. Recent findings indicate that stress caused by poor academic performance is the leading cause of mental illness among learners in secondary schools, accounting for over 44% of reported mental health cases. Although this data primarily refers to secondary education, similar stressors persist and even intensify at the university level, especially in private institutions where students often balance academic demands with part-time employment or financial responsibilities. Furthermore, access to mental health care remains limited, with many institutions lacking trained counsellors, support programs, or mental health awareness campaigns. The stigma associated with seeking mental health support further discourages students from opening up about their struggles, pushing many into isolation and worsening their psychological condition. This situation underscores the need for a deeper understanding of how internalizing mental health problems affect the psychological well-being of students, particularly in the context of private universities in Kampala District.

### **Problem Statement**

Internalizing mental health problems such as anxiety, depression, and emotional distress have increasingly become a significant public health concern among university students globally, with nearly 45% of the global disease burden among individuals aged 10 to 24 attributed to mental illness, yet only 2% of health budgets are dedicated to mental health care. These issues manifest through persistent sadness, self-isolation, and chronic worry, which adversely affect students' academic performance, social engagement, and overall psychological well-being. In Africa, the situation is exacerbated by a severe shortage of mental health professionals and widespread cultural stigma, resulting in limited access to appropriate care. Uganda is no exception, with recent studies indicating that 30% of Ugandans suffer from a mental disorder, largely due to poverty, substance abuse, domestic violence, and stress from personal and academic pressures. The problem is particularly evident in Kampala District, where students in private universities often face academic overload, financial constraints, and limited access to counselling services, yet mental health remains under-addressed in university policies and programming. With stress from academic failure accounting for over 44% of reported cases of mental illness in learners, there is a growing need to understand how internalizing disorders impact students' psychological well-being to guide appropriate mental health interventions and support systems (Makerere University School of Public Health, 2024; Monitor, 2024).

### **Objective of the study**

To assess the relationship between internalizing mental health problems and the psychological well-

## **II. LITERATURE.**

A study conducted by The Lancet Psychiatry Commission revealed that mental illness accounts for approximately 45% of the global disease burden among individuals aged 10 to 24 years, yet mental health services remain critically underfunded, with only 2% of health budgets allocated to mental health. The study

emphasized that internalizing mental health problems such as depression, anxiety, and emotional distress are increasingly affecting university students, resulting in poor academic outcomes and diminished psychological well-being. These conditions are driven by factors such as social media exposure, economic pressures, and global crises like climate change, which contribute to heightened levels of stress and emotional vulnerability among youth.

In Africa, a study conducted by *Le Monde Afrique* highlighted that many countries, including Togo, face a dire shortage of mental health professionals, compelling communities to adopt informal support systems such as training hairdressers in basic mental health care. Another study found that African students are increasingly susceptible to emotional distress due to economic hardship, cultural stigma, and the psychological trauma caused by environmental disasters. In Uganda, a study conducted by Makerere University School of Public Health and Butabika National Referral Hospital revealed that 30% of the population suffers from mental health disorders, with university students identified as a vulnerable group due to academic pressures, lack of social support, and poor access to mental health services. Furthermore, a study reported by the Daily Monitor indicated that stress due to poor academic performance accounts for over 44% of mental health challenges among learners, a figure that may reflect the situation in higher education as well. Specifically in Kampala District, a study conducted in selected private universities found that students often experience elevated levels of stress, emotional instability, and academic burnout due to the combined effects of financial constraints, limited psychosocial support, and the stigma associated with mental illness. Despite the increasing awareness of mental health issues, internalizing mental health problems remain under-explored in the context of private universities, where institutional policies and mental health services are often inadequate.

### Research materials and methods

The study adopted a descriptive cross-sectional research design and was conducted among students in selected private universities in Kampala District, Uganda. This design was appropriate because it enabled the researcher to examine the relationship between internalizing mental health problems and the psychological well-being of students at a specific point in time. A quantitative approach was used to gather data, allowing for the statistical analysis of responses to test the association between the two key variables. The target population comprised undergraduate students enrolled in private universities within the district, and a sample size of 316 respondents was determined using Slovin's formula, ensuring that the findings would be generalizable to the wider student population.

Participants were selected using stratified random sampling to ensure representation from different faculties and academic years, followed by simple random sampling within each stratum. A structured self-administered questionnaire was used to collect data. The questionnaire included standardized scales to measure internalizing mental health problems such as depression and anxiety and psychological well-being indicators like self-esteem, life satisfaction, and emotional balance. The reliability of the instrument was tested using Cronbach's Alpha, and all variables showed acceptable internal consistency above the 0.7 threshold.

Data collected was first coded and entered into the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 25 for cleaning and preliminary analysis, including descriptive statistics such as frequencies, means, and standard deviations. Further inferential statistics, including Pearson correlation analysis and linear regression, were conducted using STATA version 15 to determine the strength and direction of the relationship between internalizing mental health problems and psychological well-being. The regression model was used to assess the predictive effect of internalizing disorders on students' emotional and mental functioning. Significance was tested at the 95% confidence level, and a p-value of less than 0.05 was considered statistically significant. The findings were then interpreted to establish whether higher levels of internalizing mental health problems were associated with lower psychological well-being among university students.

### III. RESULTS

**Table 1: Results of the Pearson correlation for the relationship between internalizing mental health problems and the psychological well-being of students**

		Index for Internalizing mental health problems	Index for Psychological wellbeing
Index for Internalizing mental health problems	Pearson Correlation	1	-.448**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	305	305
Index for Psychological wellbeing	Pearson Correlation	-.448**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	305	305

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

#### Source: Primary data, 2024

The study findings in Table 1 present the results of the Pearson correlation analysis examining the relationship between internalizing mental health problems and the psychological well-being of students. The Pearson correlation coefficient for the index of internalizing mental health problems is -0.448, indicating a moderate negative correlation with psychological well-being. This correlation is statistically significant, with a p-value of 0.000, which is well below the alpha level of 0.01. The negative correlation suggests that as the levels of internalizing mental health problems increase, the levels of psychological well-being decrease. Specifically, students who report higher levels of anxiety, depression, and related internalizing issues tend to experience lower psychological well-being. This finding is consistent with the PWB theory, which asserts that mental health challenges adversely impact one's overall sense of well-being and life satisfaction.

Furthermore, this result aligns with Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory, which posits that individual experiences are shaped by interactions within their environments. The significant correlation implies that the internalizing mental health issues faced by students may be influenced by various environmental factors, including academic stress, social isolation, and inadequate support systems. Addressing these external factors can be crucial in improving students' psychological well-being.

In conclusion, the findings underscore the importance of recognizing and addressing internalizing mental health problems within university settings, as they are inversely related to psychological well-being. This highlights the need for effective mental health interventions and support services aimed at alleviating internalizing symptoms, thereby enhancing the overall well-being of students in private universities.

#### Qualitative Result

This findings presents interview responses focused on assessing the relationship between internalizing mental health problems such as depression, anxiety, and stress and the psychological well-being of students in selected private universities in Kampala District, Uganda. The objective is to explore how these internalizing issues affect students' emotional states, academic performance, and social interactions. Through thematic analysis, we delve into participants' personal experiences and observations, highlighting the complex dynamics between internalizing mental health challenges and overall well-being. The insights gathered from students, counselors, and university staff reveal the profound impact of these issues on students' lives, often leading to feelings of isolation, diminished academic engagement, and increased emotional distress. By analyzing these responses, we aim to illuminate the intricate relationship between internalizing mental health problems and psychological well-being, identifying critical areas for intervention and support that can foster a healthier academic environment for all students.

When respondents were asked about their experiences with internalizing mental health problems, such as depression, anxiety, or stress, several participants shared poignant insights that reflect the complexity of their struggles.

*One female student living with depression articulated her experience of prolonged emotional numbness, fatigue, and low self-worth. She described her daily battle to get out of bed and attend lectures, which has often resulted in missed deadlines and a noticeable decline in her academic performance. Despite occasional attempts to confide in friends, she expressed a profound sense of isolation, feeling that no one truly understands her pain (Source: DS-3).*

*A male student with anxiety shared his challenge of excessive worry about exams and a persistent fear of failure, even when he is well-prepared. He noted that his anxiety disrupts his sleep, concentration, and participation in group discussions. When his anxiety peaks, he isolates himself to avoid perceived judgment from others, which ironically exacerbates his condition (Source: AS-3).*

*Another participant diagnosed with ADHD mentioned that, while his condition is often associated with externalized behaviors, he also faces significant internal stress due to difficulties in focusing, particularly*

during exams. This academic frustration often spirals into self-doubt and anxiety, making it exhausting to manage both his emotions and coursework (Source: ADHDS-3).

A participant living with Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD) explained that his condition, while outwardly expressed, is deeply rooted in emotional distress. He admitted to feelings of rejection, chronic stress, and loneliness, particularly when he feels misunderstood or unfairly treated by authority figures. These internal struggles have sometimes led him to skip classes or react aggressively (Source: ODDS-3).

A hall warden observed that many students frequently experience internalized issues such as stress, anxiety, and emotional burnout. She noted that these problems often go undetected as students choose to suffer in silence, often only reaching out when the emotional burden becomes unbearable (Source: HWU-3).

A university counselor remarked on the prevalence of stress and anxiety, particularly during examination periods. He reported that some students experience panic attacks, sleepless nights, and even suicidal thoughts. He emphasized the necessity for early mental health screening and suggested that lecturers be trained to recognize early warning signs among their students (Source: UCU-1).

Finally, an administrator confirmed that many students are silently battling depression and anxiety. He revealed that while some students do reach out for help, the numbers remain low due to stigma. He noted that stress from academic overload, financial instability, and relationship issues significantly contribute to emotional distress among students (Source: DSU-4).

When asked about the common internalizing mental health challenges faced by students at the university, several key issues were highlighted.

One participant experiencing depression identified persistent sadness, isolation, self-harm ideation, and hopelessness as prevalent problems. She explained that many students walk around campus smiling while secretly battling emotional struggles in private (Source: DS-4).

Another student with anxiety noted that exam-related stress, social anxiety, and fears about the future are significant challenges. He pointed out that the fear of being perceived as weak often prevents students from seeking help (Source: AS-4).

A participant diagnosed with ADHD indicated that stress, poor concentration, and low academic confidence are common, particularly among those who learn differently and lack adequate support. He observed that many peers experience imposter syndrome, which further fuels their anxiety (Source: ADHDS-4).

A hall warden shared observations that loneliness, fear of failure, and relationship breakups are among the most common internalizing mental health issues. She mentioned that some students spend hours alone in their rooms, disengaging from social activities (Source: HWU-4).

Another participant emphasized that anxiety, chronic stress, and depressive thoughts are widespread among the student population. They noted that students from rural areas or disadvantaged backgrounds often internalize their struggles due to fear of being judged or misunderstood (Source: UCU-4).

Finally, an administrator remarked that while many students are affected by these challenges, few seek counseling services until their mental health has deteriorated significantly. They highlighted that stigma, lack of awareness, and inadequate outreach hinder early intervention (Source: DSU-4).

When exploring the support systems or resources available to assist students dealing with internalizing mental health problems, several participants shared their insights.

One student with depression acknowledged that while there is a counseling center, it is often understaffed and difficult to access during crises. She noted that some peer counseling groups offer emotional support, though they may not be equipped to handle more serious cases (Source: DS-4).

Another participant living with anxiety stated that although some lecturers provide emotional support, the university lacks a structured mentorship or mental health program that students can consistently rely on. He recommended that faculty members be more proactive in referring students to counseling services (Source: AS-5).

A student with ADHD mentioned that while the university provides general counseling services, these do not cater specifically to the needs of students with learning or attention disorders. He suggested that the institution develop inclusive support systems tailored for neurodiverse students (Source: ADHD-5).

A hall warden noted that residential wardens are trained to identify and refer students showing signs of emotional distress. However, she admitted that the mental health referral pathway needs strengthening and better coordination with academic units (Source: HWU-5).

Another participant indicated that the university offers one-on-one and group counseling sessions, organizes stress management workshops, and conducts awareness campaigns. However, they acknowledged that more funding and trained personnel are needed to meet growing demands (Source: UCU-5).

Finally, an administrator reported that efforts are underway to improve student wellness programs through partnerships with NGOs and mental health organizations. He added that plans include creating a 24/7 support helpline and expanding access to mental health services in residence halls (Source: DSU-5).

In general, the results from the Key Informant Interviews and the Pearson correlation analysis together reveal a significant relationship between internalizing mental health problems and psychological well-being among private university students. The KIIs illustrate how academic pressures, feelings of isolation, and self-doubt contribute to students' mental health struggles. Additionally, the complex factors influencing these challenges further underscore the necessity for universities to implement robust and comprehensive support systems. By addressing both academic and emotional needs, universities can create an environment that promotes overall psychological wellness and enhances students' potential for academic success.

### Discussion of results

The study's findings, as shown in Table 1, provide a significant insight into the relationship between internalizing mental health problems and psychological well-being among students in private universities in Kampala District. The Pearson correlation coefficient of -0.448 indicates a moderate negative relationship between the two variables, which is statistically significant with a p-value of 0.000. This suggests that as internalizing mental health problems such as depression, anxiety, and stress increase, psychological well-being tends to decrease. Specifically, students experiencing higher levels of emotional distress report lower levels of self-esteem, life satisfaction, and overall psychological well-being. This finding aligns with previous studies, which assert that mental health challenges adversely affect one's emotional state and general well-being (Lanza et al., 2015; Leung et al., 2019).

The results also echo the principles of the Psychological Well-Being (PWB) theory, which posits that mental health issues significantly impair an individual's sense of well-being. In addition, the findings are consistent with Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, which highlights the role of environmental and contextual factors in shaping mental health outcomes. Factors such as academic pressures, lack of social support, and increased isolation appear to exacerbate internalizing mental health problems, thus impacting students' psychological well-being. Further qualitative insights obtained through the Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) corroborate these quantitative results. Participants reported that many students struggle with internalizing mental health issues like anxiety, depression, and stress, which often go undiagnosed or untreated until the students reach a breaking point. For example, a student with depression described how emotional numbness and fatigue made it difficult to attend classes or meet academic expectations, leading to a decline in her academic performance. Similarly, students with anxiety reported that worries about exams and fear of failure affected their ability to concentrate, leading to withdrawal from social interactions and academic tasks.

The interviews also highlighted the lack of adequate mental health support systems in the universities. Students expressed that while counseling services exist, they are often understaffed and not easily accessible during critical times. This lack of access, combined with the stigma surrounding mental health issues, prevents students from seeking help until their emotional struggles significantly impact their academic and social lives. Additionally, staff members noted that although there are some informal support systems, such as peer counseling groups and stress management workshops, these services are insufficient to meet the growing demand for mental health care.

## IV. CONCLUSIONS

The study concluded that there is a significant negative relationship between internalizing mental health problems and the psychological well-being of students in private universities in Kampala District. The Pearson correlation coefficient of -0.448, which was statistically significant, indicated that as internalizing mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, and stress increase, students' psychological well-being decreases. This finding aligns with existing theories in mental health, particularly the Psychological Well-Being (PWB) theory, which emphasizes the detrimental effect of mental health problems on one's emotional state and overall life satisfaction. It also resonates with Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, which suggests that external environmental factors, such as academic pressures, social isolation, and inadequate support systems, contribute significantly to mental health challenges faced by students. The qualitative data further supported these findings, highlighting that many students, despite struggling with internalizing mental health issues, do not seek help due to stigma and a lack of awareness about available support systems. The students' personal experiences illustrated how internalizing mental health problems impact their academic performance, emotional states, and social interactions, leading to a cycle of isolation and diminished engagement in both academic and social activities. This emphasizes the need for universities to implement more robust and accessible mental health support services to address the growing mental health challenges among students.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

In response to the findings of the study, several key actions should be taken to address the significant relationship between internalizing mental health problems and the psychological well-being of students in private universities in Kampala District. First, universities must strengthen their mental health services by ensuring that adequate counseling resources are available, particularly during periods of academic stress. The staffing of counseling centers should be increased, and these services should be made more accessible to students who may be struggling with mental health issues. This includes offering extended hours of operation, providing immediate assistance during crises, and ensuring that students feel comfortable reaching out for help without fear of stigma or judgment.

Universities should implement comprehensive mental health awareness campaigns to reduce the stigma surrounding mental health issues. These campaigns should educate students, faculty, and staff on the signs of internalizing mental health problems, such as anxiety, depression, and stress, and encourage early intervention. It is essential that students understand that seeking help for mental health issues is not a sign of weakness but a proactive step toward improving their overall well-being.

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