



Exploring the Relationship of Empathy, Materialism, Selfishness and Altruism among University Students in Pakistan

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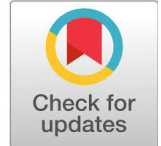
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Abstract

This study aimed to examine the role of empathy in balancing materialism, selfishness and altruism among young adults in the university students of Karachi, Pakistan. It was hypothesised that individuals with lower levels of empathy showed high materialism and selfishness and demonstrated lower tendencies of altruism. A quantitative research design was employed, with participants aged 18-25 from diverse socio-economic backgrounds. Various standardised scales were used, including the Material Value Scale (MVS-15), the Empathy Assessment Scale (EAS-13), the Self-reported Altruism Scale (SRAS-9), and the Selfishness Questionnaire (SQ-24) to assess the relationship among the variables. The study further examined the gender difference among the variables. The results indicate that empathy is positively correlated with altruism and negatively correlated with selfishness and materialism. Empathy promotes prosocial behaviour and serves as a protective factor against self-centred behaviour. Moreover, gender difference shows no significant difference in the variables (empathy, altruism, selfishness, and materialism). The results carry implications for education, policy making, and health care, awareness based on empathy-based training to reduce self-centred behaviour while fostering selfless behaviour, promoting community well-being.

Keywords

Altruism
Empathy
Gender difference
Materialism
Selfishness
Young adults

INTRODUCTION

In the rapidly evolving of the contemporary society, individuals are often shown with the complex of moral values, behaviour tendencies and social expectations. The survival of the human beings does not solely rely on the individuals' basic needs of existence. Instead, they need to hinge together as a cohesive species for enduring the challenges of nature and environment such as climate change, pandemics and biodiversity loss (Ostrom, 1990). Human social interaction and sense of belonging is essential for emotional well-being, mental health and personal development (Leary, 2022). Healthy social interactions promote harmony, help in problem solving and overall life satisfaction (Vygotski, 1978). The ancient study describes, the organization of society, and our interaction often revolve around one another, they interact to build trust, coordinate actions, and maintain order through communication and shared norms (Durkheim, 2016) in which people help, understand and mutually work for themselves and for the welfare of humankind.

A society never grow when the cohesion of humans begins to spoil, such as exploitation and dishonesty, it weakens the cooperation, conflicts happen and the reason of institutional declines, when they start to prioritize themselves over others, never meant to cooperate, coordinate and so on (Putnam, 2000). The community of humans divided into several parts just for the reason of their personal benefits, they lived solely and the systematic view of the love, kindness, care for others and togetherness demolished successfully. They usually don't like to hang together but if they do, their verbal and non-verbal communicates lots of their feelings and thoughts about others. People behave too artificially and it is the reason behind the decrease in relational satisfaction and increase in the conflicts of the human beings (Zhou, et al., 2025).

The central argument of this study is that empathy functions as the balancing force that modulates the tension between materialistic, selfish tendency and altruistic behaviour. Empathy is the bridge between the behaviours that affect the individual's personality and interaction with others and helps in the increase of prosocial behaviour (Decety, et al., 2016), Studies have shown that individuals high in materialism are less likely to show empathetic concern because materialistic concern prioritizes competition and extrinsic validation over connection (Kasser, 2003). Empathy directly caters to selfishness by making the needs of others prominent. It promotes emotional connection and ethical awareness, enabling the individual to act selfishly (Esinberg, 2000). When individuals engage in morality, they are more likely to act ethically even when it conflicts with their self-interest (Batson, 2011). Empathy is a well-established pioneer to altruistic behaviour. Empathetic concern motivates individuals to help others, even at a personal cost.

Empirical studies show that interventions can significantly increase charitable giving, volunteering, compassionate decision making and altruistic concern (Decety & Cowell, 2014).

Significance of the Study

This study explores how empathy, a core psychological and emotional phenomenon of individuals, works as a balancing mechanism of the other opposing humanistic tendencies: materialism and selfishness and altruistic behaviour. In a world with the increasing culture of individualism, there is a necessity to understand the role of empathy for the sake of psychological wellbeing, personal and societal growth and social harmony. By investigating the role of empathy, how it balances the way individual material desires and self-interest while maintaining concern for others. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of human core desires and moral behaviour. This finding can offer more insights to educators, psychologists, and community leaders who want to foster more prosocial and morally educated individuals in societies. Furthermore, this research will provide valuable structures for personal growth, encouraging individuals to reflect on their values and interpersonal behaviours over their desires and wishes. However, this study addresses the need for promotion of empathetic behaviour to work as a balancing behaviour to the growing materialism and self-centeredness that ultimately promotes more developed and cooperative societies.

Objectives of the Study

The primary aim of this study was to explore the role of empathy in balancing the psychological tendencies of materialism, selfishness and altruism in an individual. It seeks to understand how empathy: an emotional ability helps to understand the feelings of others, can influence and moderates the derives of self-interest, materialism and altruistic behaviour. Specifically, this study aims to define these constructs: empathy, materialism, selfishness, and altruism from the psychological and philosophical perspectives. It also tends to examine the relationship between empathy and materialistic values. Also investigates how empathy impacts selfish behaviour and analyses the connection of empathy and altruistic behaviour. Relatively, this study seeks to determine whether higher levels of empathy contribute to a healthier balance between self-centred and prosocially motivations. This finding provides the insight and recommendations for fostering empathy as a means of balancing the other self-centred behaviour and a path of social, societal and personal wellbeing.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research studies show that empathy, the ability to understand others, helps in motivating altruistic behaviours, which involve selfless concern for others (Batson, 2011). In contrast, materialism and selfishness, concerns on materialistic possession and only concerns for themselves, are associated with lower levels of prosocial behaviour and empathy (Kasser, 2003). The behaviours are the competing forces of each other. Whereas, increase in empathy and altruism involves decreasing materialistic values (Tyerman, 2015) and these can lead to a decline in social trust and community bonds break down. Personal relationships are compromised due to the prioritizing of wealth and fame over genuine connections. According to a study, status seeking and self-centred behaviour can interrupt with the development of interpersonal, reciprocal and deep relations (Twenge & Campbell, 2009). Mental health problems like depression, anxiety and feeling of loneliness rises due to the constant comparison and competition with others (Nolen-Hoeksema et al., 2008). The high materialism in a person causes destruction, meanness, coordination, lack of caring loving nature, less focus on well-being and personal growth (Kasser, 2003). Selfishness can also be the cause of weakening of personal and genuine relationships, fostering distrust, isolation and a long term of dissatisfaction (Crocker & Canevello, 2008). Those behaviours erode the community values, reduce cooperation and make the surroundings artificial.

Materialism is defining as the individual's value over material possession and wealth as centre to their life and as a source of happiness and success (Richins & Dawson, 1992), an envy (desire for other's possession) (Belk, 1985), involves in prioritizing extrinsic goals (such as wealth, fame and image)

over intrinsic goals (such as personal growth and relationships) (Kasser, 2003), have different degrees of attachment to possessions across societies (Ger & Bellek, 1996). Material wealth can contribute to well-being up to a certain edge, studies show that excessive materialism is correlated with reduced life satisfaction, increased anxiety and drained social relationships (Dittmar et al. 2014). Selfishness refers to the tendency to act on one's own interest without regard for the need and rights for others. According to Rachlin (2002), selfishness is defined as the behaviour that benefits the individual at the expense of others. Behaviours that are motivated by personal gain and less consideration for other's needs and feelings (Baumeister, 2007). Selfish individuals may struggle to form meaningful bonds and have lower levels of cooperation, trust and empathy (Campbell & Foster, 2011). Selfishness often contrasts with altruism and is defined as the pursuit of one's own interest are the cause of various discrimination, indifference, mental illness, community fragmentation, exploitation, shallow the values, traditions and neglect of future generations.

In the contrast of materialism and selfishness, altruism involves acting out of concern for the welfare of humankind and society without personal gain. Altruism defined as the behaviour that is motivated to benefit another person without personal gain, in the ancient definitions are motivational estate that ultimate goal of increasing another's welfare (Batson, 2011), behaviour that benefits others to a cost of oneself, motivated by the moral obligations to other's help (Durkheim, 2005), ought to live for others and place their interests above one's own (Oliner & Oliner, 1992). Study shows that altruism is positively associated with mental well-being, stronger social relationships and meaningful life (Penner et al., 2005).

Empathy is the multidimensional construct the helping behaviour, according to Edith Stein a German Phenomenologist stated that Empathy can be interrupted and blocked, but it cannot be forced to occur, and the ability to understand and share the feeling of others, understanding of mental and emotional estate of others (Decety, et al., 2016), an emotional state that stems from another's emotional state. Empathy encompasses the Cognitive, Affective and Effective components. Cognitive empathy entails the understanding of others mental health and perspective. Affective empathy feels what others feel (Decety, et al., 2016). Empathy develops through socialization, attachment and experience and underpin emotions such as guilt, compassion and shame. Neuro-biologically, empathy involves the mirror neuron system, the anterior insula, and the medial prefrontal cortex-areas implicated in emotional processing and perspective-taking (Decety, 2011).

Functionally, empathy facilitates cooperation, altruism and conflict resolution. It acts as a brake on aggression and a motivator for helping behaviour (Rumble, et al., 2010). Too much empathetic behaviour leads to distress and avoidance which is not always beneficial, whereas a moderate level of empathy appears essential for healthy interpersonal functioning, moral values and behaviours (Furnham & Sjkqvist, 2017). It protrudes trust and cooperation, reduced crime and conflicts, inclusive communities, greater life satisfaction, less mental illness like anxiety, depression and stress, social, emotional support and cultural richness in children too (Kingsbury et.al, 2020; Davis & Davies, 2025; Hunt et.al, 2023).

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a quantitative research design with convenience sampling method. In the data collection method participants were approached individually physically from different universities of Karachi. Participants who agreed to take part in the study with their own willingness were briefed about it. Data was collected from different universities of Karachi from different divisions. A total of 300 data were used in the study whereas 25 forms were discarded at the time of entering the data because of the missing items in the forms. There was no special setting in the data collection. The collected data in physical form was stored in a locked secured cabinet. Participants were debriefed after completing the study.

The target population of the study was young adults between the ages of 18 and 25 currently students in any university in Karachi, Pakistan. The selection of this age group was because they were the best representative of the development of interpersonal relationship, empathy, moral, ethical values and

related constructs of an individual. A sample of 300 participants was drawn by convenience quota sampling method (in which the students were easily available and willing to participate in the studies and quota for the equal representation of numbers of male and female in the study).

Inclusion Criteria

- Aged between 18-25 years
- Willing to participate voluntarily
- Equal representation of males and females (150 each)
- Diverse economic background
- Diverse ethnic backgrounds and divisions

Exclusion Criteria

- Individuals below 18 and above 25.
- Severe mental impaired participants
- Participate who withdrew or did not provide the consent
- Incomplete or inconsistent responses on scales

Firstly, we ask the participants about their consent. If they agreed the forms were given to them. Participants of this study were assured that all information they will provide will be kept confidential and they have a right to withdraw at any time. This study did not carry any harm to animals, environment and social emotional dignity of a participant. The demographic form collected basic information of the participant for comprehensive analysis, including details such as name, age, gender, educational divisions, marital status, family structure, and socio-economic status, cultural and religious background. This demographic ensured the detailed understanding of the participants' background.

Instruments

There were four following scales used in the form to measure the variables:

Empathy Assessment Scale

The Empathy Assessment Scale (EAS), developed by Malakcioglu (2022), was used to measure the empathy among participants. This scale consisted of 13 items divided into three sub dimensions, including Social Interaction (4 items), Cognitive Behaviour (5 items), and Emotional Identification (4 items). The items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "Never to Always" with higher scores demonstrating higher empathy. The EAS demonstrated strong psychometric properties of reliability and validity. The scale showed Cronbach's alpha of 0.845, with subscales reliability of Social Interaction (0.696), Cognitive Behaviour (0.802), and Emotional Identification (0.964), representing excellent internal consistency.

Material Value Scale - Short Form

The Material Value Scale-Short Form (MVS-15), by Richins (2004), was used to measure the individuals' materialistic possessions. This short version consisted of 15 items with three dimensions including Success (possess as a measure of achievement), Centrality (importance of possessions in life), and Happiness (belief that materialistic possession leads to life satisfaction). Items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly agree (5) to strongly disagree (1)" with some items reversed score. The short form was developed to increase more clarity and reduce redundancy with strong psychometric properties. The short version scale reported Cronbach's Alpha reliabilities ranged from 0.76 to 0.82 of all three subscales, and the total scale showed the reliability of above 0.80, which indicated good internal consistency.

Selfishness Questionnaire

The Selfishness Questionnaire (SQ), developed by Raine and Uh (2019) was used to evaluate the

selfishness in participants. This scale comprised 24 items with three dimensions of selfishness, including Egocentric, Pathological and Adaptive. The items were rated on a 3-point Likert scale ranging from disagree (0) to agree (2), with higher scale reflecting higher selfishness tendencies. The Selfishness Questionnaire demonstrated psychometric properties with Cronbach's alpha reliabilities of 0.80 for Adaptive Selfishness, 0.85 for Pathological Selfishness and 0.78 Egocentric Selfishness, which indicated good internal consistency.

Self-Report Altruism Scale – Short Form

The Self-Report Altruism Scale – Short Form (SRAS-9), is a short version of original 20 item scale developed by Rushton et al. (1981), was used to measure the altruistic behaviour of an individual in everyday life. The short form consisted of 9 items that reflected altruistic behaviour such as sharing, donating and helping others. Their responses were rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from never (1) to always (5). This scale provided best measures with strong psychometric properties comparable to full scale. Reported that Cronbach's alpha coefficient ranged from 0.78 to 0.84 indicated good internal consistency.

RESULTS & FINDINGS

The descriptive statistics of the demographics showed the mean (M) age was 21.66 having Standard Deviation (SD) as 2.18) years which means the sample consisted primarily of young adults. Gender was equally distributed (M= 150, having frequency as 150) reflecting equal representation of male and female. The average education level was 2.55 (SD=1.13) that the most participants were in their higher level of studies. Marital status showed the majority of the participants were single (M=1.21, SD=0.60). Family structure showed almost equal distribution (M= 1.54, SD= 0.50). Religion was majorly Muslims (M= 1.02, SD=0.13). The value of skewness showed the variables (age, gender, education, and family structure) approximately normally distributed except marital status and religion which shows positive skewness due to the dominance of single and Muslim participants. Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics of the main study variables. The results showed that participants reported high scores of mean in materialism (M=45.16, SD=6.92) and empathy (M=39.80, SD= 5.50), while having low scores on altruism (M=26.99, SD=4.89) and selfishness (M=24.49, SD=5.20) the number of observations of each variable is 300.

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics

	M	SD	N
Empathy	39.80	5.503	300
Altruism	26.99	4.897	300
Materialism	45.16	6.922	300
Selfishness	24.49	5.208	300

M= mean, SD= standard deviation, N= total number of observations.

Table 2 presents the correlation among the study variables, in which the table shows that empathy was strongly and positively correlated with altruism ($r = .81, p < .01$), while empathy strongly negatively correlated with materialism ($r = -.79, p < .01$) and selfishness ($r = -.77, p < .01$) and materialism and selfishness are positively correlated ($r = .76, p < .01$). This finding indicates that higher altruism and empathy associated with lower materialism and materialism and selfishness tend to increase together.

Table 2
Correlation matrix of main study variable

Variables	1	2	3	4
Empathy	-	.81**	-.79**	-.77**
Altruism		-	-.74**	-.72**
Materialism			-	.76**
Selfishness				-

* $P < 0.1$, ** $P < 0.5$

Table 3 presents the output of the independent sample t-test for gender difference result in the study variable. There is no significant gender difference found in the variable empathy, materialism, selfishness and altruism ($p < .05$). The effective size (Cohen's d) was very small and shows negligible difference between male and female participants across all variables.

Table 3

Independent sample t-test for Gender Difference in Study variables (N=300).

Variables	Male		Female		t	p	95% CL		Cohen's d
	M	SD	M	SD			LL	UL	
Empathy	39.98	5.720	39.63	5.291	.555	.579	-.899	1.605	0.063
Materialism	45.18	7.186	45.14	6.673	.050	.960	-1.536	1.616	0.005
Selfishness	24.15	5.548	24.83	4.839	-1.131	.259	-1.536	1.616	0.130
Altruism	27.02	5.004	26.95	4.804	.118	.906	-1.048	1.181	0.014

Note: M = mean, SD = standard deviation, P= alpha level, LL= lower limit, UL=upper limit. Total number of observations is N= 300.

Discussion

The results of the present study show that empathy is negatively correlated with variable materialism. This finding aligns with the findings of the study conducted by Zeng et al. (2025), where observers' empathy is significantly reduced toward individuals exhibiting high materialistic tendencies, suggesting a negative association between empathy and materialism. This relationship appears mediated by perceptions of morality and warmth, indicating that materialism may diminish empathic responses by degrading these social cues. Materialism diminishes empathetic behaviour and negatively affects prosocial behaviour. The results show that empathy has negatively correlated with empathy, this study is aligned with the finding of Kashirskaya (2020), where the differences in students' representations of selfishness and altruism across empathy levels support the idea that individuals with greater empathy are less inclined toward selfish behaviour, reflecting attitudinal shifts that mirror behavioural tendencies.

Results find that empathy is positively correlated with empathy. Further studies which align in the findings state that empathy is shown to positively predict altruistic behaviour in which they define that high empathy individuals are more likely to act altruistically (Sapra & Joshi, 2025). In an economic increasing game, increasing empathy clearly shows positive altruistic sharing empathic feelings accounted for more than 40% of the increased giving (Klimecki, et al., 2016). Empathetic traits positively predicted altruistic behaviour in natural settings, real life. Results find out that there is no such gender difference in the variable Materialism, Selfishness, Altruism and Empathy. There are such reasons of why there is no such a gender difference in the variables while, many other studies show the gender differences in the variables such as empathy, many researches stated that women reported higher in empathy but in a recent study's results show incredible change in the earlier concept about the gender-based phenomena. There measures challenge the gender gap, in this study a large-scale measure of self-report based neural measures found that women scored higher on questionnaires and in EEG showed no actual gender difference in empathetic neural reactions. This clearly shows that the apparent differences are due to social pressure and fixated gender-role expectation rather than true capacity (Pang et al. 2023).

Another study stated that empathy involve many components such as cognitive, affective empathy and prosocial concern and some having specific gender roles and stereotypes but in the study of dynamic emotional video stimuli and eye tracking: finding says that there is no such significant gender difference in influence of empathetic feeling and effective, cognitive empathetic concerns (Martínez-Velázquez, et al., 2020). Materialism is driven by personality, social and cultural values not by specific gender discrimination. Many researches show that socio economic factors, cultural context, religious teaching and peer influence are strong predictors of materialism in an individual rather than gender. In the collectivistic culture (like Pakistan), male and female are equally exposed to the trends, influenced by social media, globalizing and advertising. These factors minimize gender stereotypes.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the role of empathy in balancing selfishness, altruism, and materialism. The results show that empathy plays a significant role in reducing selfishness and materialistic behaviour and promotes altruistic behaviour. This study presents that empathy as a foremost psychological factor that helps in balancing an individuals' self-centred behaviour, social responsibilities and personal demands. Another crucial finding was there is an absence of gender difference among these traits which challenges the culture factor, social factor and gender stereotypes which influences the gender strongly. This finding breaks the concepts about gender specificity and trait patterns among the both genders. Overall, the study contributes in the aspects of theories that empathy works as a mediator among those negative forces/behaviours. It carries important social, practical, policy implications and health care, especially in the awareness of gender-neutral intervention and the programs which promote prosocially behaviour and reduced self-centred behaviour.

Limitations & Future recommendations

The samples were collected from young adults (18-25) from different universities of Karachi. This sample restricts the generalizability of the other age groups, different cultural and regional background and non-student population. Secondly all the variables were measured by self-report scale (altruism, materialism, selfishness and empathy). Such measures are influenced by social biasness and participant's response style. This study conducts cross sectional design, which restricts the ability to identify the causal relationship among variables. This study is conducted through the specific age group (young adults), age factors influence, cultural factors individualistic and collectivistic culture may differ in the values. Expanding the sample to include a larger number of participants from different backgrounds, educational level, age group and cultural background will help improve the generalizability of the result. Using qualitative methods (interviews, focus groups) will provide deeper understanding of participants' personal motivation and experience behind the behaviours. Longitudinal research design should employ and track the changes in materialism, selfishness, empathy and altruism over time. This approach provides a better understanding of how this behaviour develops and continues from different life stages. By using a cross-cultural approach, we identify whether these relationships which are observed in this study are universal or specific. Inclusion and exclusion of different variables in the future study would help to give a more comprehensive understanding of the construct. Using experimental design could manipulate the variables and conditions to test the causal effect and stronger evidence of how the variables affect each other.

Implications of the Study

The study contributes the clear evidence that empathy plays a vital role in regulating social behaviour such as materialism, altruism and selfishness. It helps in understanding how the helping behaviour/prosocially tendencies act as a balancing mechanism of self-centred tendencies. This study supports social and personality models of behaviours which emphasize the interplay between collectivistic and individualistic orientation. Provide awareness on the importance of empathy building in college, schools and universities. Designs the awareness programs and counselling sessions targeting materialism and selfishness. Encourage the educationalist for adding moral lessons and emotional values in the curriculum of the students. Empathy helps in reducing negative effects in the community and promotes community well-being. NGO's programs use this finding to encourage prosocially behaviour and cooperation among peoples.

The findings challenge gender stereotypes showing empathy, materialism, selfishness and altruism are behaviours beyond gender. The finding shows no gender difference among these behaviours so the policy and training should be applied to both equally. Designed social and educational programs to benefit both genders equally. The finding challenges the stereotypes and believes that empathy and altruism are female traits and materialism and selfishness are male traits. Culture plays an important role in shaping behaviour rather than gender. Mental health practitioners/professionals should include empathy promoting work for the well-being of young adults.

Preventive programs should be planned for both without using different approaches for the gender. Awareness programs can promote empathetic behaviour in universities and college students and lessen the self-centred behaviour. Initiative from community health services can use empathy-based activities to strengthen prosocially behaviour and the welfare of community mental health. Educational policies should include moral values, emotional values and empathy-building activities in the curriculum. The policies for youth should be made for both genders equally. Social policies should be made to promote prosocially behaviour and reduce self-centred behaviour. Mental health policies should also be made for the awareness and promotion of healthy empathetic and prosocially values to prevent anti-socialization, and stress. Cultural values should also reduce gender limitations and stereotypes and promote empathy and altruism as shared values.

Competing Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Authors' Biography

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