

## PREVALENCE OF RELIGIOUS AND CULTURAL PARANORMAL BELIEFS AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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### ABSTRACT

A quantitative analysis of paranormal beliefs among university students in Pakistan was conducted to evaluate the prevalence of these beliefs, and to compare male and female students on the basis of their beliefs in cultural and religious paranormal phenomena. A sample of 500 students from the University of Gujrat, Pakistan was administered the 35-item Religious and Cultural Paranormal Beliefs Scale to collect data. A cross-sectional design with a convenience sample method of data collection and the use of SPSS to analyse the data revealed that 89.6% of the students had some level of belief in the paranormal, and that 55.6% of the subjects had moderate paranormal beliefs, while 34% of the students had either strong or very strong beliefs. While independent t-tests revealed that there were significant differences between boys and girls on the total measure of paranormal beliefs ( $p = .002$ ) and on the cultural dimension of paranormal beliefs ( $p = .001$ ); there were no significant differences between boys and girls on the religious dimension of paranormal beliefs ( $p = .215$ ) indicating that the girls and boys in the sample had a similar worldview regarding religion. The existence of paranormal beliefs at the university level in Pakistan illustrates the strength of academic belief systems involving paranormal constructs. Furthermore, the results of this study show the relationship between religious doctrine and cultural mysticism in Pakistan.

**Keywords:** Religious and cultural paranormal beliefs, gender differences, cultural competency, human experiences.

### INTRODUCTION

Students are an extraordinary group of people going through a difficult stage of life where they are exposed to many different types of belief systems and ways of seeing the world (Hecht et al., 2021). Paranormal is defined as being outside what can normally be explained scientifically, and a paranormal experience is either something that has occurred outside the range of normal

scientific explanation (for example), or it is an experience that violates the fundamental tenets of science (Irwin, 2009). In Islamic culture, paranormal experiences can often overlap with the concept of miracles, mysticism, inspiration, and the unseen (Ayar et al., 2022). Paranormal belief can be defined operationally as a collection of experiences that fall under parapsychology or

those that are associated with mystical research; additionally, these types of beliefs can have a significant impact on how individuals think about their lives and how they live their lives (Ayar et al., 2022). Although many people thought that advancements in both science and technology would diminish people's attachment to these types of beliefs, many people continue to have very strong beliefs in astrology, telepathy, and guardian angels (Stefański & Jach, 2021). Evidence of the prevalence of such beliefs can be found all over the world, including approximately 57.7% of Americans believe in spirits, with 28% of people in the United Kingdom believing in ghosts (Poppy, 2017). Additionally, paranormal concepts in Pakistan, such as jinns and angels, are often connected to religious beliefs or practices which ultimately shape and influence how individuals view the world around them. Some have argued that education may reduce people's belief in these types of experiences, but empirical evidence regarding this suggestion is limited and contradictory (Zahid et al., 2023). This study is intended to research the frequency of belief in and differences in belief between males and females currently enrolled in school or attending an institution of higher education located in Gujrat, Pakistan. Previous research has shown a challenging relationship among education level, personality and belief in the paranormal. For example, neuroticism was found to be significantly positively correlated to traditional religion (Kumar et al., 2020) for post-graduate students. In addition, the female students in a study by Zaman et al. (2020) scored higher than male students overall on the Paranormal Belief Scale. Research from around the world provides further evidence supporting these findings. For example, Aarnio and Lindeman (2005) found in their study of Finnish university students that vocational students have more paranormal beliefs than university students as a result of their greater preference for analytical thought. Also, university students enrolled in theology had the most belief in the paranormal. The above studies

provide support that while education is a potential contributor to differences in belief in the paranormal, intuitive thought and gender differences are still large contributors as well.

## METHODS

**Sample and Procedure (Participants):** Five-hundred (500) undergraduate students, from the University of Gujrat, made-up the total sample of this study. A cross-sectional survey design was used to conveniently collect data from participants. Participants included males and females between the ages of 19 years and 23 years. Students who were physically handicapped and/or psychologically impaired were excluded from the sample, as well as participants who declined to give consent.

**Instruments:** Demographic Information Form was used to gather basic demographic information about each participant (age, gender, department, and place of residence).

**Religious and Cultural Paranormal Beliefs Scale (Iram, 2020):** It is a 35 item scale Two subscales as religious and cultural. The Religious and Cultural Paranormal Beliefs Scale utilized a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Not at all; 5 = Complete belief) for each item. In terms of reliability; Religious and Cultural Paranormal Beliefs Scale has a reported reliability of  $\alpha > .70$  for both subscales.

**Data Analysis (Statistical Analysis):** SPSS was utilized to analyze the data collected for this study (frequency distributions were used to assess the prevalence levels of paranormal beliefs and independent samples t tests were used to assess gender differences in paranormal beliefs).

## RESULTS

The results indicated a high prevalence of paranormal beliefs among the student population. A vast majority (89.6%) maintained at least a moderate level of belief.

**Table 1: Prevalence of Paranormal Beliefs among University Students (N= 500)**

Belief Category	Score Range	f	%
Very Low	35-70	52	10.4
Moderate	71-105	278	55.6
Very Much	106-140	115	23.0
Complete	141-175	55	11.0

Table 1 displays the distribution of paranormal belief levels among university students (N = 500). Majority of those who participated in this as a result of this study demonstrate a moderate degree of paranormal belief (55.6 percent of respondents = 278 out of 496) through their scores (which ranged from 71 to 105 on the survey instrument). Furthermore, a significant number of respondents reported high levels of paranormal belief (e.g., not just moderate or low but high; of the total respondents reporting high levels of belief, there were 11 respondents who

indicated that they were "very much" or "completely" belief). In contrast, the number of students indicating a very low level of belief (n = 52) represents a very small proportion of the entire population sample about 16 percent of all responding students) based upon their responses thus far for this study. Overall, these results would indicate that a large portion of respondents (89.6 percent of participants) possess at least a moderately high degree of belief in some form of religious or cultural based paranormal phenomena.

**Table 2: Gender Differences in Paranormal Beliefs (N= 500)**

Variable	Gender	n	M	SD	t	p
Religious Beliefs	Male	250	45.12	5.80	-1.24	.215
	Female	250	45.78	6.05		
Cultural Beliefs	Male	250	44.03	7.15	-3.42	.001
	Female	250	46.22	7.10		

Variable	Gender	n	M	SD	t	p
Total Paranormal Belief	Male	250	89.15	11.45	-3.12	.002
	Female	250	92.00	10.80		

According to the analysis, there was a statistically significant difference in scores on the overall measure of Paranormal Belief,  $t(498) = -3.12$ ,  $p = .002$ . Females ( $M = 92.00$ ) had higher scores than males ( $M = 89.15$ ) on this measure. In the Religious subscale, a significant difference was not found between males ( $M = 45.12$ ) and females ( $M = 45.78$ ),  $t(498) = -1.24$ ,  $p = .215$ ; therefore, both genders in this academic setting demonstrated similar beliefs in paranormal/religious entities. There was, however, a highly statistically significant difference between genders on the Cultural subscale,  $t(498) = -3.42$ ,  $p = .001$ . Females had a significantly higher mean score ( $M = 46.22$ ) compared to males ( $M = 44.03$ ). These findings imply that while religious paranormal views are consistent across the sample, gender specifically influences the endorsement of cultural superstitions and mystical practices.

## DISCUSSION

The key research findings revealed that there is a very high rate of occurrence of paranormal belief among university students in Pakistan. Over 89 percent of the sample populations reported either a moderate or substantial amount of belief in most of the paranormal realms. As indicated in Table 1, over one-half (55.6%) of students in the study sample had moderate belief levels; while an additional 34 percent indicated they either believe "very much" or "completely" in those realms. High levels of paranormal belief show that student exposure to academia will not necessarily remove or replace their traditional or mystical worldviews (Andrews & Tyson, 2019). Irwin (2009) indicates that paranormal beliefs are

used as a psychological strategy to cope with uncertainty; therefore, it may explain why students hold strong beliefs in a scientific academic setting. A main focus of the research was to examine the differences between religious and cultural sub-scales of belief. Findings indicate there were no statistically significant differences in the prevalence of paranormal religious beliefs between male and female members of the study sample ( $p = .215$ ). The approximately equal levels of both males and females representative of the study sample in beliefs concerning supernatural beings (angels or jinns) reflects a common religious identity among the people of Pakistan; thus transcending gender differences. Similar to the perspectives the concepts of the "unseen" in Islamic culture are deeply intertwined in standards of teaching individuals in what is taught through religious education, and through the development of social norms and general development (Dean et al., 2022). As opposed to the other dimensions of the paranormal, there was a statistically significant difference between females ( $M=46.22$ ) and males ( $M=44.03$ ) on the Cultural subscale ( $p=.001$ ), which implies that females may be more socialized toward or receptive to cultural superstitions and mystical practices, as suggested in the literature (Zaman et al., 2020). This gender difference in Total Paranormal Beliefs ( $p=.002$ ) is primarily based on the differences seen in the Cultural dimension. Aarnio and Lindeman (2005) previously documented that the observed gender differences in endorsement of paranormal beliefs are often due to differences in cognitive processing between females, who tend to employ more intuitive forms of thought processing, and males,

who tend toward analytical forms of thought processing depending on the sociocultural context. While the university is creating a frame for conducting scientific inquiry; there are strong supports for the existence of paranormal beliefs associated with religious beliefs and/or culture. Educators' and mental health providers' cultural competence is essential in working with students who hold these worldviews (Asif et al., 2020).

### LIMITATIONS

Researchers should always consider the limitations of their own research so they can put their results into context. The following are some of the limitations of this study: The study employed a convenience sampling method; therefore, the results may not be representative of all the university students in Pakistan. The results only represent the population of the university of Gujrat and may not be reflective of different demographics and cultural characteristics in other regions/cities within Pakistan. As the data was collected with a self-report measure (Religious and Cultural Paranormal Beliefs Scale), respondents may have reported socially desirable responses or been influenced by their academic setting to underreport desirable "superstitions" they might have held or believed in. As well, because the study was only conducted at one university, students from other regions of Pakistan (e.g. highly urbanized Karachi compared to more traditional rural areas) may have different levels of belief than those students who participated in this study. Lastly, because this was a cross-sectional study, the results represent only a snapshot of beliefs as of a certain date and therefore will not demonstrate changes or evolution in a student's beliefs across his/her four years of academic study.

### IMPLICATIONS

This study has implications for theory, education and practice in Pakistan, primarily that the existence of such beliefs despite years of education suggests that education does not necessarily eliminate non-empirical belief systems. The existence of paranormal beliefs among university students also supports the idea that

multiple systems of knowledge can coexist in an individual.

Additionally, the absence of gender differences in paranormal religious beliefs indicates that these beliefs are based on a person's culture and religious beliefs, and therefore reflect a common worldview among religious people of different genders. However, the presence of significant gender differences in paranormal cultural beliefs demonstrates that sociocultural socialization and cognitive processing styles have an effect on how beliefs are formed.

From an educational viewpoint, the findings of the study indicate that critical thinking and scientific literacy should be an important part of the higher education curriculum, specifically through the fields of anomalistic psychology and philosophy of science. By integrating these disciplines into the higher education curriculum, students can evaluate beliefs that they have learned from their culture without jeopardizing their religious and cultural identity.

From a practice perspective, the findings of the study highlight the need for cultural competence in applied settings, especially in mental health.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations below are made for future research and practice based on the results and limitations identified above. Future studies should utilize more diverse samples from diverse, representative provinces, and/or both public and private universities throughout Canada to create a complete, national profile of paranormal beliefs. While this study quantified the prevalence of paranormal beliefs (89.6%) through the use of quantitative methods, future studies could explore the reasons students believe in paranormal phenomena through qualitative research such as interviews. More specifically, qualitative research could determine the relationship between paranormal belief and scientific training. Academic advisors and educators should recognize the high prevalence of paranormal belief among post-secondary students and could integrate discussions of anomalistic psychology or philosophy of science into their academic counselling practices to help students

critically evaluate how cultural myths relate to objective science. As noted by Zahid et al. (2023), mental health providers in Pakistan must practice cultural competency in their mental health interventions. Given that belief in jinn or the unseen is nearly universal (as shown by the lack of significant differences between men and women in the religious belief score), clinicians or therapists working with this population should acknowledge these worldviews, rather than dismissing them as abnormal. Future researchers should also use longitudinal designs to assess how increasing periods of scientific education can influence the number of cultural paranormal beliefs exhibited.

### CONCLUSION

Based on the data collected, university students in Gujrat display a clear predominance of cultural and religious paranormal beliefs, as the overwhelming majority of participants indicated intermediate to high belief levels. While gender affects cultural beliefs, both genders are equally likely to embrace each of the religious paranormal constructs. These data indicate that training programs and services provided by the university and other mental health agencies should include culturally appropriate programs and staff who acknowledge these beliefs which are very firmly embedded in the students' worldviews and therefore significantly guidance for the student's success.

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