

CAN SITCOMS EASE THE BLUES? THE EFFECT OF SITCOMS ON REDUCING DEPRESSION AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

Depression among university students is an area of increasing concern worldwide. Students are often reported to seek comfort in drugs, which further deteriorates their mental and physical health. There is a high need to identify alternative solutions to student depression that are ideally not harmful for the students. This study aimed to assess the effect of sitcoms on depression among university students. This research intends to examine whether sitcoms are helpful in reducing depression among students; what is the nature of pleasure they seek to reduce the depression; and if there is any difference of effects in males and females. To assess students' depression, the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI) was used. The researcher employed experimental method based on pre-testing, stimulus, and post-testing. The results of this study show a major shift from a higher BDI depression state to a lower BDI depression state after exposure to a sitcom. Uses and Gratification Theory (UGT) is used as the basis of this study to analyse the impact of sitcoms in relation to the psychological and gratification needs of the students. According to the results of this study, it is evident that students use this medium (sitcoms) to gratify the need for relaxation and it helps in reducing depression.

Keywords: Beck Depression Inventory, Sitcom, Depression, University students, Uses and Gratification

1. INTRODUCTION

This research focuses on the effect of sitcoms on depression among students. Depression is a common and prevailing health issue nowadays. Oxford Dictionary defines Depression as a medical condition in which a person feels extremely sad and anxious and often has physical symptoms such as sleeplessness (Oxford Dictionary, 2019).

Media has played a significant role in spreading awareness regarding the emerging and prevailing issue of depression and anxiety. There are different means of communication that highlight the importance of depression and its treatment. Various programmes, films, articles and reports are made to provide appropriate information to

the public about this issue. Mass media has been a powerful tool since its inception. Access to mass media has become increasingly easier for the general public. The use of mass media may be a debatable topic; however, its impact cannot be denied. Media is a major tool around the globe for the propagation of ideas and the shaping of beliefs. Mass media is the most powerful tool used by the ruling class to manipulate the masses. It shapes and moulds opinions and attitudes and defines what is normal and acceptable. One of the greatest and most enjoyable innovations in mass media is broadcast media. Consuming broadcast media puts the brain into an Alpha state, which is linked to relaxed states, meditation, and increased suggestibility, meaning that it is similar to a state

of hypnosis. Researchers have inferred that consuming broadcast media is akin to staring at a blank wall for several hours. Broadcast streaming is a series of rapid images, which causes the brain to enter into this Alpha state and continues to draw attention to the screen. Since its invention, broadcast media has been enjoyed by people of all ages, and has a strong influence on people's lives, people's lifestyles, and even their behaviour.

From governments and large corporate organisations to small-scale businesses, social ventures, and individuals, everyone is connected through mass media, and this is where its power comes from. Consumers of mass media form their opinions based on what they see and how they relate to the content being aired. Media is not only a powerful tool for communicating information, but also a powerful tool of entertainment that allows viewers to explore the world from the comfort of their seats. This entertainment is often an escape from the hustle and bustle of the physical world and provides an opportunity for relaxation. One of the groups most affected by content streaming is university students (Patkar et al., 2016). Viewers tend to copy what they see (Ytre-Arne, 2019). They need role models and need to establish their identity. A significant percentage of these viewers consists of university students (Patkar et al., 2016). University students often have to undergo immense pressure from balancing studies, exams, finances, and extracurricular activities (Ribeiro et al., 2018). One solution that is becoming progressively common is entertainment through media (Patkar et al., 2016). Students often watch serials, movies, shows, and other forms of media. Sitcoms such as *Bulbulay* is one of the most popular Pakistani sitcoms and has received wide audience appreciation in Pakistan (ARY Digital, 2020). *F.R.I.E.N.D.S* is a globally popular American sitcom that remains widely watched and discussed among young and university-aged audiences (Buitendijk, 2019).

According to The Mayo Clinic, which is an American not-for-profit academic medical centre based in Rochester, Minnesota, focused on integrated clinical practice, education, and research, data suggests that when a person laughs,

positive benefits for the brain and body are experienced (Sparks, 2019). Laughing increases the endorphins that are released by the brain, enhances intake of oxygen-rich air, and stimulates heart, lungs and muscles. It also has positive effects for blood pressure and heart rate. It also stimulates circulation and aids muscle relaxation, both of which can help reduce some of the physical symptoms of stress (Sparks, 2019).

As per the National Institutes of Health (NIH), a part of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, depression is the leading cause of nonfatal disability worldwide. Because onset of depression is common in adolescence and young adulthood, it coincides with a pivotal period of physical and psychological development and can lead to poorer psychosocial functioning, lower life and career satisfaction, more interpersonal difficulty, greater need for social support, more comorbid psychiatric conditions, and increased risk of suicide. Even after recovery from an initial episode of depression, affected young people frequently experience substantial psychosocial impairment and are at increased risk of recurrence of episodes of depression (Primack et al., 2009).

The development of depression in adolescence may be understood as a biopsychosocial, multifactorial process influenced by risk and protective factors including temperament, genetic heritability, parenting style, cognitive vulnerability, stressors (for example, trauma exposure or poverty), and interpersonal relationships. It is plausible that exposure to electronic media may be one of the factors that influence development of depression. This exposure is massive: when accounting for multitasking, current adolescent media use is estimated at 8.5 hours per day (Primack et al., 2011).

There are many different mechanisms by which media exposure may influence development of depression. In terms of the sheer volume of exposure, adolescents who spend excessive time engaging with media may not have as much opportunity as their peers to cultivate protective experiences that require active social, intellectual, or athletic engagement. Related to this, excessive media exposure often occurs at night and can

displace sleep, which is valuable for normal cognitive and emotional development. It has also been suggested that early media exposure can interfere with optimal development of executive function, potentially contributing to vulnerability to cognitive distortions that have been associated with depression. It should also be noted, however, that adolescents often use media in social settings, which may offer a social outlet that protects against depression (Boers et al., 2019; Hale & Guan, 2015; McHarg et al., 2020). Students are prominent victims of depression because they continuously face it due to academic stress, work pressure, financial crises, etc. In Pakistan, consulting with a counsellor is not considered a feasible option due to financial constraints and social unacceptability of the concept (Khan et al., 2020; Zuberi et al., 2019). Students usually resort to other forms of recreation. Among others, situation comedy, or sitcom is a famous form of entertainment because it provides students the opportunity to focus their minds on something relaxing from the comfort of their phones, tablets, computers and televisions. Sitcom is “a regular comedy programme on television that shows the same characters in different funny situations” (Oxford Learner’s Dictionaries, 2020). Many local and foreign sitcoms are becoming increasingly popular among students with the widespread use of video streaming services. Therefore, this research aims to discover whether watching sitcoms leads to a decrease in depressing state of mind of the university students of Pakistan.

1.1 Statement of Problem

Depression is a serious mental health concern among university students because academic pressure, social adjustment, financial problems, and personal stress can negatively affect their emotional well-being and academic performance. Research shows that mental health problems, including depression, are common among college and university students, making student mental health an important area of study (Auerbach et al., 2018). Humour and laughter-based interventions have been found to reduce depressive symptoms and improve psychological well-being, which suggests that comedy-based media may have a positive emotional effect (Cheng & Wang, 2015).

However, limited research has specifically examined whether sitcom exposure can reduce depression among university students; therefore, this study investigates the effect of sitcoms on reducing depression among university students.

1.2 Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study are following:

1. To investigate how sitcoms reduce the depression of university students.
2. To explore the nature of pleasure students seek to reduce depression.
3. To find whether there is any difference in the effects among males and females.

1.3 Significance of the Study

With the advent of the digital age, students prefer to spend time on digital media instead of participating in physical activities. They use social websites and video streaming platforms for recreation. The global video streaming market, valued at USD 42.60 billion in 2019, is projected to experience rapid growth between 2020 and 2027 (Grand View Research, 2019).

Depression affects a large number of students. Worldwide, 39% of students face severe mental health issues (Healthy Minds Network, 2019). 75% of cases of mental health issues begin by age 24, and 66% of students with anxiety or depression do not seek treatment (Kessler et al., 2005; Active Minds, 2020). Millions of Pakistanis suffer from mental health conditions (Javed et al., 2018). The full gravity of this situation comes to light with the realization that Pakistan has one of the lowest psychiatrist-to-person ratios in the world. According to the WHO, only 400 psychiatrists and five psychiatric hospitals exist within the entire country for a population exceeding 180 million people (Javed et al., 2018). This research intends to examine whether sitcoms are helpful in reducing depression among students, so that a recommendation can be made to the students to include more sitcoms in the media content they consume to lower their depression.

1.4 Research Questions

The research questions of the study are following:

RQ 1: How do sitcoms reduce depression of university students?

RQ 2: What is the nature of pleasure that university students seek to reduce depression?

RQ 3: Is there any difference in the effects among males and females?

1.5 Rationale

To manage the mental pressure of academics, students mostly undertake two main activities: either they use drugs such as alcohol, smoking, narcotics etc.; or they use video streaming services such as YouTube, Netflix and other social media websites for recreational purposes.

A Canadian student survey showed that tobacco, alcohol, and cannabis use remain common concerns among adolescents in Canada (Health Canada, 2016). Adolescents who use one substance are also more likely to report other forms of substance use, including alcohol, cannabis, tobacco, and e-cigarettes (Mehra et al., 2019). Smokers often perceive smoking as a way to manage stress or negative mood, but research suggests that this perceived relief may be linked to nicotine dependence and withdrawal cycles rather than long-term improvement in mental health (Leventhal & Zvolensky, 2015; Taylor et al., 2020). The rationale of this study is to find out whether watching sitcoms is a similar way to deal with depression. The result obtained after this research can then help students to watch sitcoms for entertainment and coping with depression instead of using recreational methods that are injurious to health.

1.6 Limitations

2. This study is limited to only university students. It does not apply to other levels of education.

3. The study tests the phenomenon only on Pakistani students. It is a local research and may not be applicable on international students.

4. The research is based only on a Pakistani sitcom and does not include foreign sitcoms.

5. Literature Review

The purpose of this literature review is to gain an understanding of the existing research about

depression and sitcoms and debates relevant to the topic under consideration. This literature review will help to present that knowledge in a concise manner. There are two variables in this research that will be examined: one is the impact of sitcoms; and the second is depression. Depression is “a mental illness in which a person is very unhappy and anxious for long periods and cannot have a normal life during these periods” (Cambridge Dictionary, 2020). A Sitcom is “a television series in which the same characters are involved in amusing situations in each show” (Cambridge Dictionary, 2020). This literature review intends to explore the existing knowledge and identify the gap. The identified gap will further guide the direction of this research, so that the issue at hand can be understood.

2.1 Depression and its Impact on Students

Depression is a major psychological problem among students. A study found 22% of university students seriously depressed. This indicates that a need for knowledge concerning depression still exists and should be addressed by depression-related health education programmes (Arslan et al., 2009). Depression and anxiety are the most common types of mental disorders. Many colleges and universities have arranged counseling sessions on campus that are specifically designed to help in addressing the psychological issues of their students (Bisson, 2017). Depression has a negative impact on the lives of university students and leads them to suffer emotionally. It affects the self-satisfaction and academic performance of students (Yadav & Pandey, 2017). Depression is a common issue among university students. It is equally prevalent among males and females and depression in single students is higher than among married students (Sarokhani et al., 2013). Major causes of depression among adult students include separation from home, socio-economic level, poor academic performance, and body shape or weight. To reduce the rate of depression in students, effective services in mental health are required (Faeq, 2016).

Depression, suicide, and drug use are serious concerns among youth, so efforts need to shift the efforts to prevention and early intervention,

reaching out to teens and children, when youth are experiencing significant mental health and addiction issues and need treatment. Youth depression is a significant mental health issue in Canada. Statistics Canada's National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth reveals that young people reported more symptoms of depression as they grew older, with 24% of 16- and 17-year-olds reporting symptoms of depression, compared with 9% when they were 12 and 13 (Rayter, 2019).

Psychological stress may have an adverse influence on the academic performance and lifestyles of university students and may contribute to alcohol and substance abuse, decreased empathy, and academic dishonesty (Abas, et al., 2018). A study on Nigerian university students found that depression in university students is a common issue and is significantly associated with sociodemographic factors (Adewuya, Ola, & Olaleye O Oginni, 2006). A study revealed that 37.7%, 13.1%, and 2.4% of the students were suffering from moderate, severe, and extremely severe depression and the outcomes of that study emphasised on the need for necessary mental health support services for about 15.6% of the students who were either suffering from severe or extremely severe depression at the University (Deb, Thomas, Parveen R., & Khawaja, 2016).

Another study showed that out of 502 students, 18.5% of the respondents scored high on depression (13.1% mild and 5.4% had moderate levels of depression severity), 28.6% scored high level of anxiety (13.1% mild, 14.7% moderate, and 0.8% severe) and 24% scored high level of stress (14.3% mild and 8.1% moderate level of stress). The early prevention of anxiety, depression and stress is critical since, if left untreated, it can have serious consequences on students. The results of another study found that, out of the sample of 392 students, 88 (22.45%) students were depressed. There were 27 (6.9%) students with borderline depression, 35 (8.9%) with moderate depression, 16 (4.1%) with severe depression, 10 (2.6%) with extreme depression, and mood disturbances among 71 (18.1%) (Trivedi, Dhakappa, & Ghildiyal, 2016). Depression and alcohol use are often found in college students, particularly during their first year. Attending college is

considered to be a positive experience by many, however the college years are often associated with increased rates of alcohol consumption, depression, and a variety of other mental health problems among students (Geisner IM, 2012). Boys and girls with depressive symptoms and girls with anxiety symptoms are more likely to have unhealthy patterns of alcohol drinking. Preventive strategies at all levels could possibly profit from a common approach to mental health and alcohol use, in particular for girls in adolescence (K., H. W., Bjørngaard, & E. L, 2017).

2.2 Role of Media in Reducing Psychological Problems

Watching comedy movies causes viewers to laugh, which helps improve the immune system by decreasing stress hormone levels (Bennett & Lengacher, 2007). Entertainment media plays an important role in public health, particularly in the area of mental health. Enjoying music, a film, a video game, or a YouTube video can improve mood, strengthen friendships, and increase competence (Goldstein, 2016). A study on breast cancer patients shows that a single laughter session, conducted as a comedy movie session, reduces anxiety, stress, and depression in breast cancer patients and can be recommended as an alternative therapy for pain relief (Kim et al., 2015). Media has been playing a constructive role in mental health promotion by conveying the reversibility of psychiatric problems and highlighting the importance of family and social support for recovery. Media can be effectively used to increase knowledge, create favourable attitudes, and change overt behaviour. Viewing a documentary about schizophrenia can lead viewers to perceive schizophrenia as less dangerous. The National Mental Health Programme of India has attempted to use media publicity to reduce stigma and encourage treatment seeking. Laughter therapy is a widely used alternative therapy (Padhay et al., 2014). Globally, there are various laughter therapy clubs where people gather to practise laughter. Simulated laughter helps the body release anti-stress hormones and reduce stress (Kim et al., 2015). Laughter is beneficial for health because it synchronises the contraction of

facial muscles, improves blood flow, and increases oxygen intake. Improved blood flow leads to the release of adrenaline, which creates feelings of happiness and joy and is beneficial for both mental and physical health (Kim et al., 2015). A study on people aged 21 to 59 shows that, after daily routine tasks, one can watch sitcoms on TV to compensate for stress because sitcoms give relief and provide physical and psychological health benefits, such as feeling less stressed and depressed, having more optimism and vigour, lowering blood pressure and stress hormones, and enhancing components of immunity (TV Land, 2018). Watching positive humour can serve as an effective approach to reduce nervousness. Positive emotions, such as humour, are contradictory to negative emotions, such as depression, so they can balance negative effects at least temporarily, it is a way to get relief (Colom et al., 2011). There is evidence that watching television reduces depression. TV watching is often an indoor activity and may prevent people from spending time outside; however, humorous content may still help improve mood (Emamzadeh, 2018). Laughing while watching comedy movies causes blood vessels to dilate by 20%. When a person laughs, the tissues forming the lining of blood vessels expand and increase blood flow, which reduces blood pressure and has effects similar to exercise. Laughter while watching sitcoms relieves anxiety and depression. It also reduces aggression and fear, while horror films can affect the body physiologically and may result in hypertensive diseases. Entertainment-education programmes and web-based media have strong potential for reducing mental illness stigma (Ma, 2017). Different types of humour may help improve the ability to deal with stressors and bring positive effects in life. Laughter may cause muscular relaxation, beneficial effects on vascular function, reduction of pain, and positive immunological and endocrine effects (Gremigni, 2013). Laughter and humour therapy are used in health care to achieve physical and psychological health-related benefits. Therapies may include humorous videos, stories, and laughter yoga. This therapy can be used to decrease pain, anxiety, stress, depression, and fatigue, and to improve immunity, quality of

life, happiness, and sleep quality (Bennett et al., 2014). Watching comedy movies gives a sense of relief, which comes as a resolution of tension after hearing a joke (Korostenskiene & Pakrosnyté, 2017). The impact of watching a funny film has been compared with a bout of aerobic exercise or starting statin treatment (BBC, 2006). Laughter therapy has been found effective in reducing anxiety. A study found that laughter yoga decreased anxiety and improved sleep quality in patients with Parkinson disease (Memarian et al., 2017). Choosing comedy movies instead of violent movies helps in stress management (Olpin & Hesson, 2012). Using humour is well accepted by the public and is frequently used as a coping mechanism. Watching humorous movies has many positive effects in the daily lives of patients, and clinicians need to take advantage of these effects. It helps in reducing stress and serves to improve the therapeutic alliance (Woodbury-Fariña & Antongiorgi, 2014). Watching Turkish comedy movie videos has a positive effect on postoperative pain and anxiety in surgical oncology patients. Humour is effective in reducing depression and worrying, and in improving sleep quality in adults. Simulated laughter can improve interpersonal relations and health conditions such as decreased appetite, pain, and shortness of breath, thus having positive effects on psychological health. Therefore, nurses can use laughter therapy as a complement to major therapies, but proper research with high-quality longitudinal and experimental planning is essential to increase the level of evidence on this intervention (Zhao et al., 2019). Humour therapy can provide an additional therapeutic tool. Therapy groups showed improvements in mood and instrumental activities of daily living, and reductions in depression scores (Walter et al., 2007).

2.3 Identified Research Gap

Depression is a common and worldwide disease these days and studies show that students, particularly university students suffer from depression, which affects their daily routine and work. Students are not self-satisfied. This then affects their academic performance. Studies have

proved that in order to escape from the psychological stress and depression, students seek coping methods and therefore, they are inclined towards alcohol consumption, dishonesty and other harmful activities. The studies further suggest that some other safe and better ways are needed to be suggested to the students so that they might not be involved in unhealthy or harmful activities.

Humor, entertainment, and laughter are parts of one's life. Studies show that in order to get relaxation from daily routines, one can watch comedy movies. Studies proved that humor works as an alternative medicine for anxiety and depression. The laughter releases hormones for happiness and joy that give a sense of relaxation. Different studies that were done on cancer, dialysis and Parkinson disease's patients, by showing them comedy movies, showed that the humor and laughter gave them a sense of pain relief. Laughter therapy has been used for physical and psychological health related benefits that did not only gave a sense of relief but it was also beneficial for blood circulation and better flow to the heart.

The studies conducted on students' depression showed the impact of educational, social and financial pressure on the mental health of students but did not suggest a way to help the students get rid of the depression without inclination towards drugs. Studies on humor, Comedy and laughter therapy were done on different patients by showing them comedy movies but these studies did not consider its impact on the depression among students. Furthermore, the type of content used in other researches that were done on other patients were movies and neglected a very famous category of entertainment media, Situation Comedy (Sitcoms) dramas that have a significant viewership.

This study takes both themes of the research into account depression and humor, and relates both of them to find out if there is any positive effect of sitcoms on the depression among students. It then can be suggested as a better option to escape from the stress, anxiety and depression instead of relying on drugs.

2.4 Hypothesis

Following is the hypothesis of this study:

H1: Watching sitcoms reduces depression

H0: Watching sitcoms does not have any impact on depression

3. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework has a significant place in research work as it gives direction to our topic area or validates or invalidates a particular phenomenon. It provides a basis, under a theory, for the research area and helps in developing the aspects of the research. The role of the theoretical framework in research is to reduce the complicated topic to two factors to simplify the concept, which include: the research problem and the rationale of investigating the issue. The theoretical framework is vital to all research to clarify the implicit theory in a manner that is more clearly defined. It may also help researchers consider their limitations and alternative theories that challenge their perspective.

The aim of this study is to find out the effect of sitcoms in reducing depression among university students. Uses and Gratification Theory is applied to investigate the use of media that is, watching sitcoms by the students to gratify their need that is, to reduce depression.

3.1 Uses and Gratification Theory

Uses and Gratification Theory (UGT) is an audience-centered approach that focuses on what people do with media, as opposed to what media does to people. Jay Blumler and Denis McQuail laid the primary groundwork in 1969 with their categorization of audience motivations for watching political programmes during the time of the 1964 election in the United Kingdom. This eventually led them and their colleagues to develop UGT.

3.2 History

In 1944, Herta Hertzog interviewed people who listened to soap operas and determined that they sought three different types of gratification from this form of entertainment. These three types of gratification were Emotional, Hopefulness, and Learning.

In 1954, Wilbur Schramm designed a formula to determine which media a consumer might select. This formula took into account the amount of gratification an individual wanted to get out of a certain form of media and the amount of effort the individual would have to exert to get it.

In 1969, Jay Blumler and Denis McQuail studied the United Kingdom 1964 election and categorized people's motives for watching certain political programmes on television. These audience motivations formed the foundation for their research in 1972 and led to UGT later on.

In 1972, Jay Blumler, Joseph Brown, and Denis McQuail proposed four uses of media: Diversion, Personal Relationships, Personal Identity, and Surveillance.

The theory proves that there is a relationship between why media is used and the gratification received. Overall, UGT has been crucial to a shift that focuses on the media user and their agency in the field of mass media studies. Uses and Gratification Theory is used as an instrument to understand how individuals connect with the media technologies. These technologies include everything from the internet to video gaming to mobile phones and television. UGT research into mobile phone usage has found that people find various gratifications from their phones, including affection, sociability, entertainment, and mobility, among others. As another example of a contemporary technology, when using social media, users can be motivated by factors like a need to vent negative feelings, recognition, and cognitive needs.

Animated movies and entertainment media are just two other examples of media technologies that UGT researchers continue to explore. On the basis of those principles, Uses and Gratifications goes on to outline five assumptions:

1. Media use is goal-directed. People are motivated to consume media.
2. Media is selected based on the expectation that it will satisfy specific needs and desires.
3. Media influence on behaviour is filtered through social and psychological factors. Thus, personality and social context impact the media choices one makes and one's interpretation of media messages.

4. Media are in competition with other forms of communication for an individual's attention. For example, an individual may choose to have an in-person conversation about an issue instead of watching a documentary about the issue.

5. People are usually in control of media and therefore are not particularly influenced by it.

3.3 Implication

Uses and Gratification Theory focuses on the use of media to gratify the needs of consumers. The research problem is to find out the effect of sitcoms, as a kind of TV programme, on reducing depression. Here, depression is a mental state. A sitcom is part of entertainment media that is used by viewers for enjoyment. According to an assumption of UGT, media is selected based on the expectation that it will satisfy specific needs and desires.

This research aims to find out why people watch sitcoms, whether the use of this media is to gratify the need for relaxation and whether it helps in reducing depression.

As early researchers have found that people get different kinds of psychological pleasures and gratifications from their mobile phones and social media. This research takes into account the medium of sitcoms and aims to explore whether viewers seek a kind of psychological support from sitcoms.

6. Methodology

This chapter explains the methodological procedure used to examine the effect of sitcom exposure on depression among university students. It presents the research design, experimental procedure, population, sampling method, sample size, variables, data collection process, instrument, scoring criteria, and method of data analysis.

4.1 Research Design

The study used a quantitative experimental research design. A one-group pre-test and post-test design was applied to measure whether exposure to a sitcom produced any change in the depression level of university students (Creswell & Creswell,

2018). In this design, respondents first completed the Beck Depression Inventory as a pre-test. They were then exposed to the stimulus, an episode of the Pakistani sitcom *Bulbulay*. After the exposure, the same instrument was administered again as a post-test. The pre-test and post-test scores were compared to assess the effect of sitcom exposure on depression.

The independent variable of the study was exposure to sitcoms, while the dependent variable was depression. The design was suitable because the purpose of the study was to measure change in respondents' depression scores before and after the experimental stimulus.

4.2 Experimental Procedure

The experiment was conducted in three stages: pre-testing, stimulus exposure, and post-testing.

4.2.1 Pre-testing

In the pre-testing stage, the respondents completed the Beck Depression Inventory through Google Forms. The purpose of this stage was to measure the respondents' depression level before exposure to the sitcom. The pre-test score provided the baseline against which the post-test score was compared.

4.2.2 Stimulus

After the pre-test, the respondents were shown an episode of the famous Pakistani sitcom *Bulbulay*. The sitcom episode served as the experimental stimulus. The purpose of showing the sitcom was to examine whether humorous media content could influence the respondents' depression level (Sarink & García-Montes, 2022).

4.2.3 Post-testing

After the respondents watched the sitcom episode, the Beck Depression Inventory was administered again as a post-test. The post-test was used to determine whether there was any difference in the depression level of the respondents after exposure to the sitcom.

4.3 Population of the Study

The population of this study consisted of university students in Pakistan. University students were selected because they commonly

experience academic pressure, social pressure, financial concerns, and other stressors that may contribute to depression.

4.4 Sampling Technique

The study used convenience sampling, which is a non-probability sampling technique (Etikan et al., 2016). This technique was used because the respondents were selected from a conveniently available group of university students who were willing to participate in the experiment.

4.5 Sample Size

The sample size of the study was 100 respondents. The respondents were divided into 10 groups, with 10 respondents in each group. Each group participated in an online session in which the pre-test, stimulus exposure, and post-test process was completed.

4.6 Research Instrument

The Beck Depression Inventory was used as the research instrument to measure depression (Beck et al., 1961). The BDI consists of 21 items that assess symptoms related to depression. Each item is scored on a four-point scale from 0 to 3, where higher scores indicate a higher level of depression. The total possible score ranges from 0 to 63 (Beck et al., 1961).

4.7 Variables of the Study

The study included one independent variable and one dependent variable.

4.7.1 Independent Variable

The independent variable of the study was exposure to sitcoms. In this study, exposure was operationally defined as watching an episode of the Pakistani sitcom *Bulbulay* during the online experimental session.

4.7.2 Dependent Variable

The dependent variable of the study was depression. Depression was measured through the respondents' scores on the Beck Depression Inventory before and after exposure to the sitcom.

4.8 Conceptualization

The main concepts of the study were depression, sitcoms, effect, university, and university students. These concepts were defined to clarify the scope of the study.

4.8.1 Depression

Depression refers to a mental state involving sadness, low mood, loss of interest, and related emotional or physical symptoms.

4.8.2 Sitcoms

Sitcoms refer to situation comedy programmes in which the same characters appear in humorous situations across episodes.

4.8.3 Effect

Effect refers to the change observed in the depression level of respondents after exposure to the sitcom.

4.8.4 University

A university refers to an institution of higher education that provides undergraduate or postgraduate education and grants academic degrees.

4.8.5 University Students

University students refer to students enrolled in a university-level programme. Students from primary, secondary, and higher secondary levels were not included in this study.

4.9 Operationalization

Operationalization explains how the key concepts of the study were measured in practical terms.

4.9.1 Depression

Depression was operationally measured through the total score obtained by each respondent on the

Beck Depression Inventory.

4.9.2 Sitcom Exposure

Sitcom exposure was operationally measured through the respondents' participation in the online session in which they watched an episode of *Bulbulay*.

4.9.3 Effect

Effect was operationally measured by comparing the pre-test and post-test BDI scores of the respondents.

4.10 Data Collection Procedure

Data were collected online. Google Forms were used to administer the Beck Depression Inventory before and after the stimulus. The questionnaire was distributed through online platforms, including WhatsApp, Facebook, and email. Zoom was used to conduct the online sessions and to show the sitcom episode to the respondents.

First, the respondents completed the pre-test through Google Forms. Second, they watched the selected episode of *Bulbulay* during the Zoom session. Third, they completed the post-test through Google Forms. This procedure made it possible to compare the respondents' depression scores before and after sitcom exposure.

4.11 Scoring and Interpretation of the Beck Depression Inventory

After the respondents completed the Beck Depression Inventory, the scores of all 21 items were added to calculate the total score for each respondent. The lowest possible score was 0, and the highest possible score was 63. The interpretation of the BDI scores was as follows:

| Total Score | Level of Depression |
|-------------|---|
| 1-10 | These ups and downs are considered normal |
| 11-16 | Mild mood disturbance |
| 17-20 | Borderline clinical depression |
| 21-30 | Moderate depression |
| 31-40 | Severe depression |
| Over 40 | Extreme depression |

4.12 Data Analysis

The collected data were analysed through the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Descriptive statistics were used to summarise the respondents' pre-test and post-test depression scores. The pre-test and post-test scores were then compared to determine whether exposure to the sitcom reduced the depression level of university students. The analysis also examined whether

there was any difference in the effect of sitcom exposure among male and female respondents.

4.13 Ethical Considerations

The respondents participated voluntarily. They were informed about the purpose of the study before data collection. Their responses were used only for academic research purposes, and their identities were kept confidential.

7. 5. Results and Findings

8. 5.1 Bar Graphs

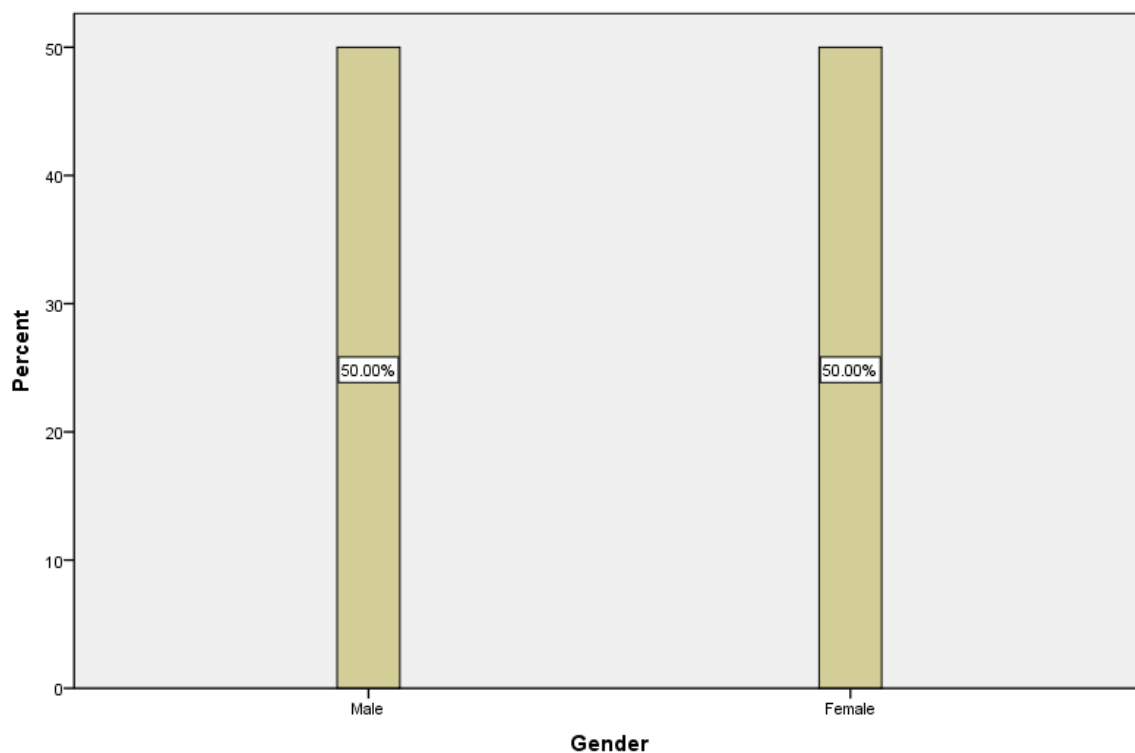


Figure 5.1.1 Total Respondents' Division

Interpretation

Figure 5.1.1 shows the total respondents' division. In this study, the research was conducted on a total

of 100 respondents. Of these, 50% were male and 50% were female.

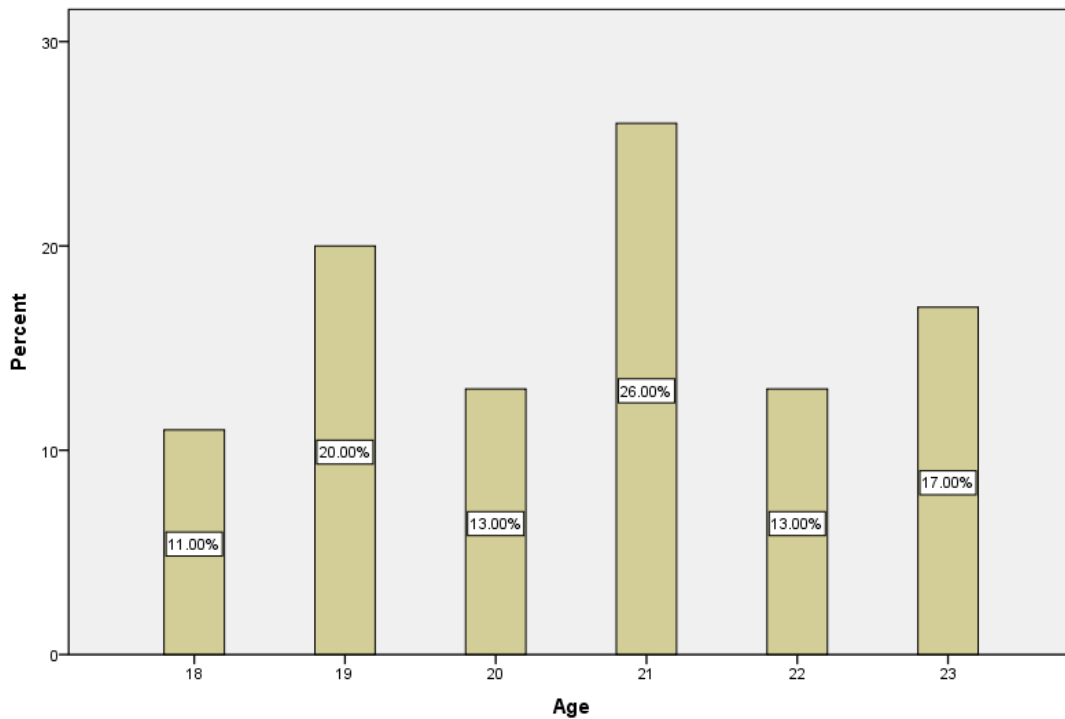


Figure 5.1.2 Age-Wise Respondents

Interpretation

This graph shows the age-wise percentage of respondents. There were 11% respondents who were 18 years old, 20% students who were 19 years

old, 13% respondents who were 20 years old, 26% respondents who were 21 years old, 13% students who were 22 years old, and 17% who were 23 years old.

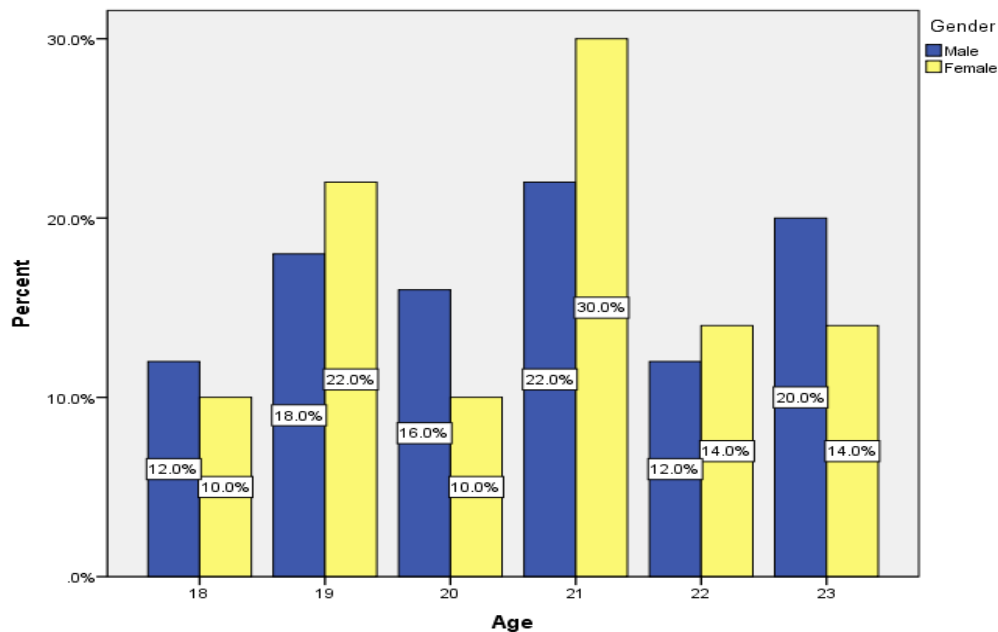


Figure 5.1.3 Age of Respondents with Respect to Gender

Interpretation

This graph, Figure 5.1.3, shows the age-wise percentage of male and female respondents. Out of 100% of female respondents, 10% were 18 years old, 22% were 19 years old, 10% were 20 years old, 30% were 21 years old, 14% were 22 years old, and 14% were 23 years old. Out of

100% of male respondents, 10% were 18 years old, 18% were 19 years old, 16% were 20 years old, 22% were 21 years old, 12% were 22 years old, while 20% were 23 years old. This graph, along with the previous two graphs, provides basic information about the composition of the respondents.

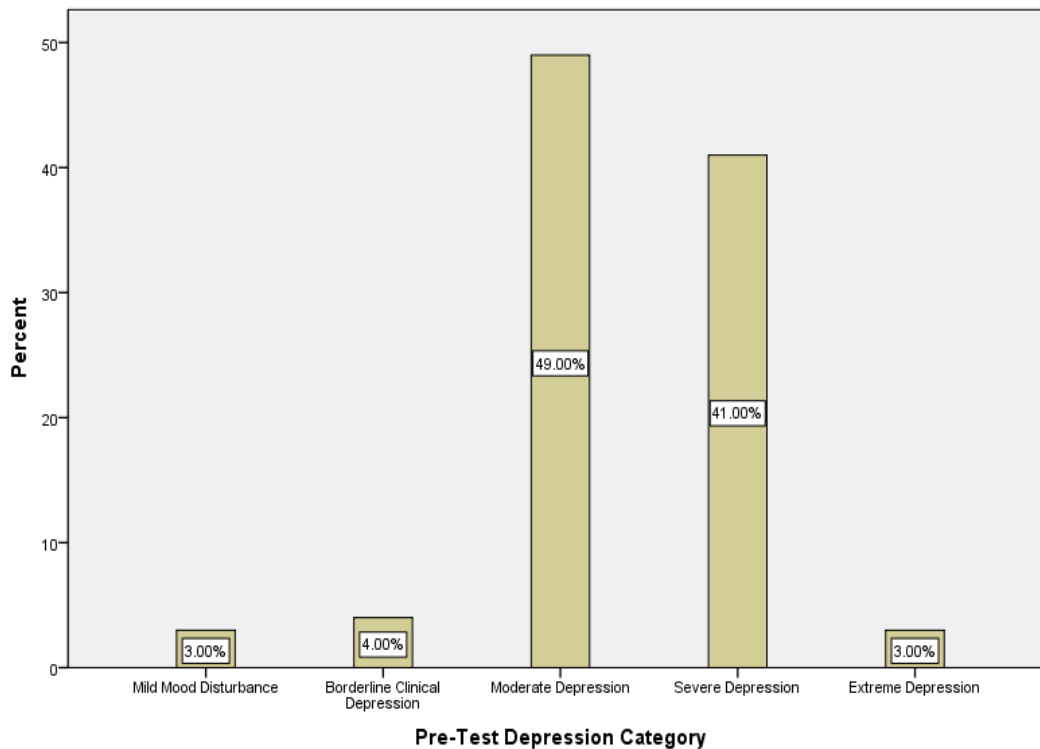


Figure 5.1.4 Overall Pre-Test Depression Category

Interpretation

According to the Beck Depression Inventory, there were a total of six states of depression:

1. Normal
2. Mild Mood Disturbance
3. Borderline Clinical Depression
4. Moderate Depression
5. Severe Depression
6. Extreme Depression

In the pre-test, 3% of the overall respondents were in Mild Mood Disturbance, 4% were in Borderline Clinical Depression, 49% were in

Moderate Depression, 41% were in Severe Depression, and 3% were in Extreme Depression. An important insight is that no respondent was found in the Normal category; hence, it is not reflected in the graph. A few respondents had Borderline Depression. Mild Mood Disturbance and Extreme Depression had the lowest number of students. The highest number of students were in Moderate Depression, followed by the second-highest number of students in Severe Depression. This shows that university students are generally highly depressed.

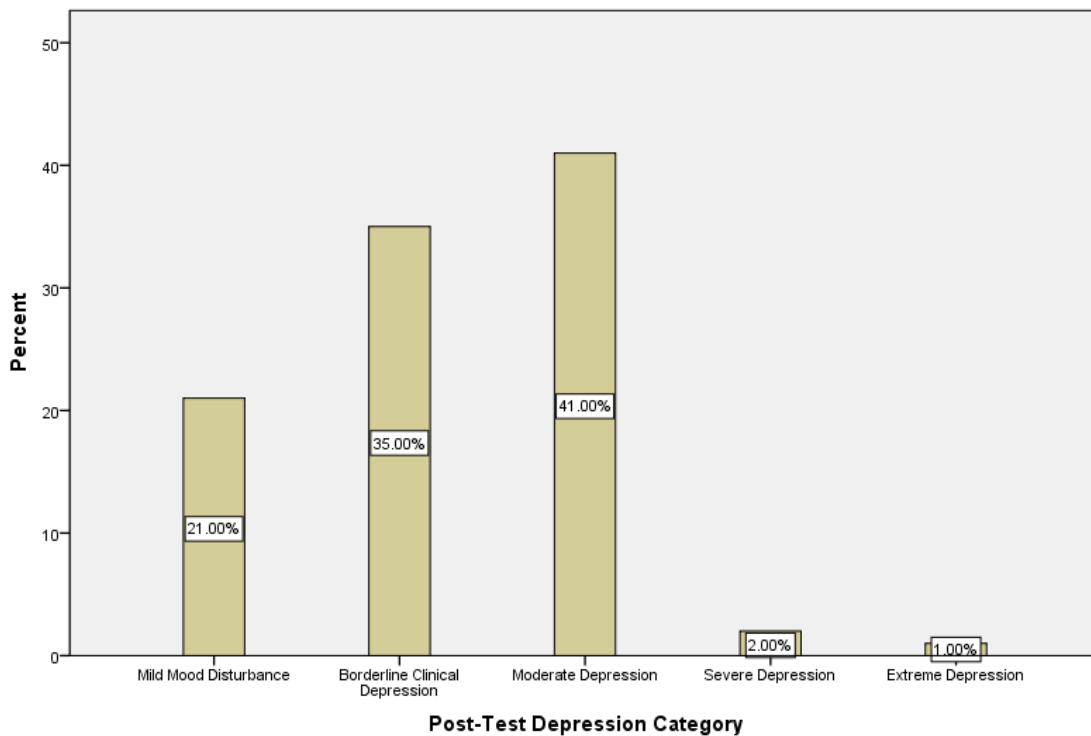


Figure 5.1.5 Overall Post-Test Depression Category

Interpretation

According to the Beck Depression Inventory, there were a total of six states of depression:

1. Normal
2. Mild Mood Disturbance
3. Borderline Clinical Depression
4. Moderate Depression
5. Severe Depression
6. Extreme Depression

In the Post-Test BDI Depression Categories, overall, 21% of respondents were converted to Mild Mood Disturbance, 35% were converted to Borderline Clinical Depression, 41% were converted to Moderate Depression, 2% to Severe Depression, and 1% to Extreme Depression.

Extreme Depression decreased from 3% in the pre-test to 1% in the post-test. Students in Severe Depression decreased to 2%, which is a major change. It must be noted that this does not indicate the absence of depression altogether. The Beck Depression Inventory has multiple states of depression, and while students are still in one of the categories of depression, their mood improved after watching the sitcom, and their depression was reduced. It is also worth noting that no respondent reported being in the Normal BDI Category in the pre-testing and post-testing. Therefore, no student had a depression status low enough to be categorized as Normal, and exposure to the sitcom stimulus also could not take any respondent to the Normal category in the data.

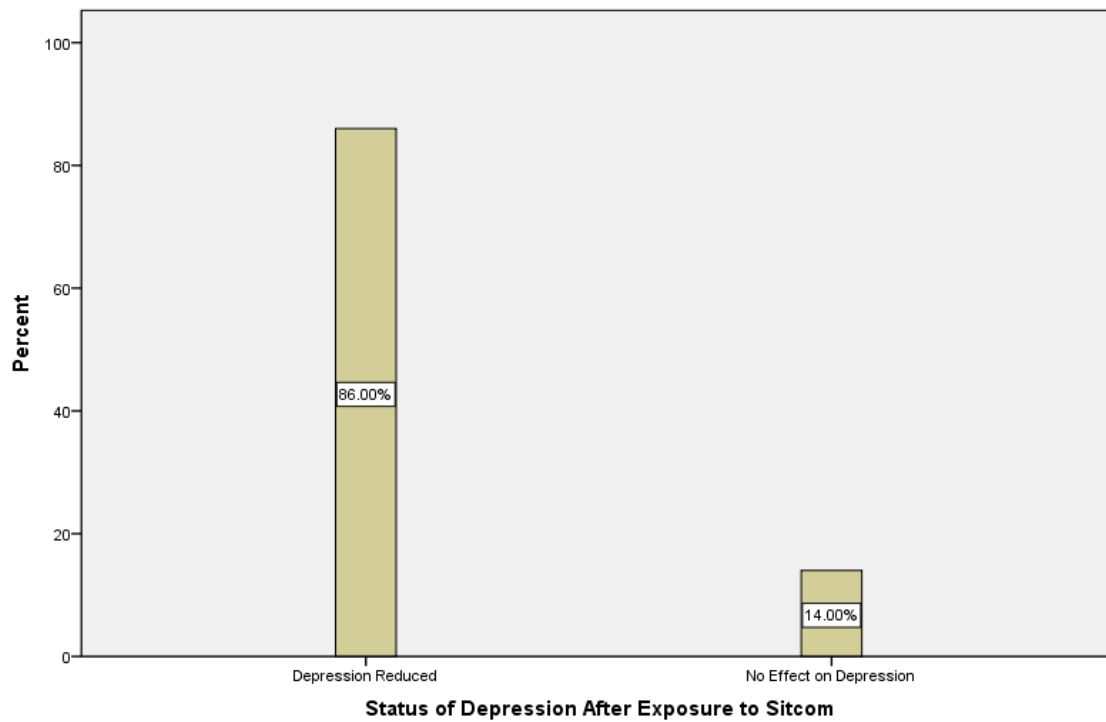


Figure 5.1.6 Overall Respondents' Status of Depression after Exposure to Sitcom

Interpretation

According to the depression categories in the BDI, after the stimulus, depression was reduced in 86% of respondents, while in 14% of respondents, no effect on depression was observed. An increase in depression was not observed in any respondent; therefore, it is not shown in the graph.

It may also be noted that “Depression Reduced” takes into account the change in the BDI category, even if it changed by a score difference of only 1 point. This is a limitation of the Beck Depression Inventory and, therefore, a limitation of this research study.

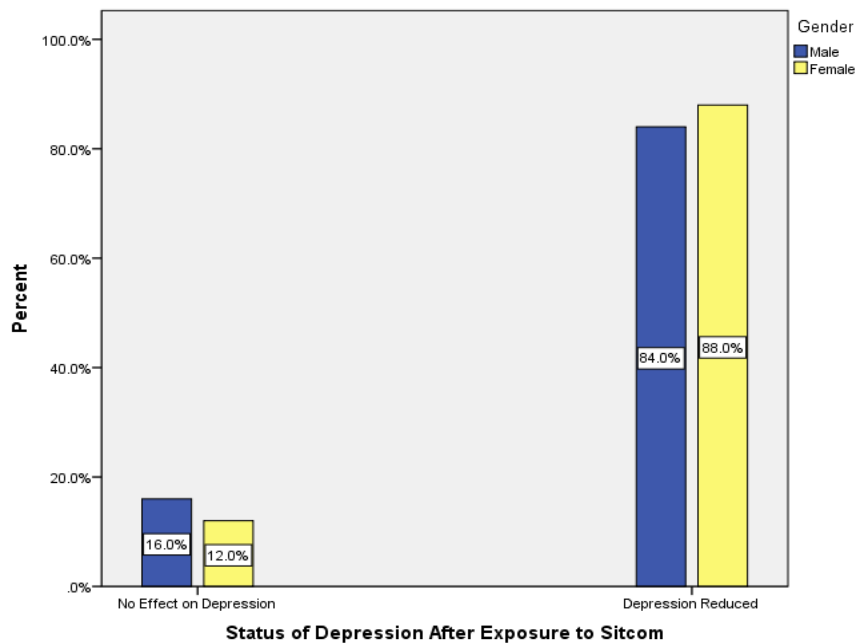


Figure 5.1.7 Gender-Wise Status of Depression after Exposure to Sitcom

Interpretation

Figure 5.1.7 shows the gender-wise status of depression after exposure to the sitcom. According to the depression categories in the BDI, after the stimulus, depression was reduced in 84% of male respondents and 88% of female respondents. In 16% of males and 12% of females, no effect on

depression was observed. An increase in depression was not observed in any respondent; therefore, it is not shown in the graph. The data does not represent a noticeable difference in depression status across genders, and the pattern of Depression Reduction or No Effect on Depression is almost the same.

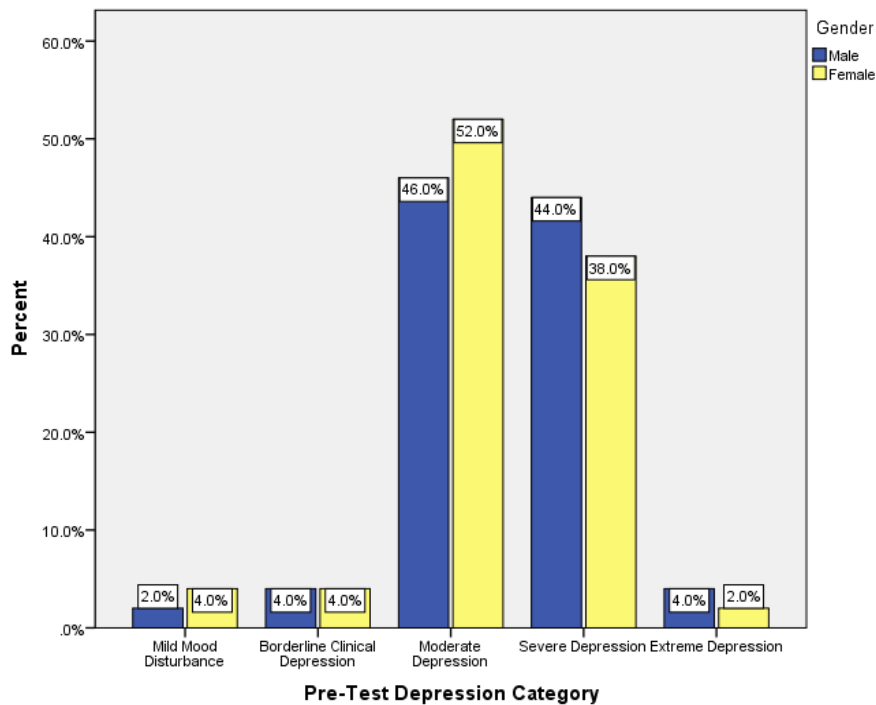


Figure 5.1.8 Pre-Test Depression Status Category with Respect to Gender

Interpretation

This graph shows the pre-test depression status category with respect to gender. In the pre-test phase, out of 100% of female respondents, 4% were in Mild Mood Disturbance, 4% were in Borderline Clinical Depression, 46% were in Moderate Depression, 44% were in Severe Depression, and 4% were in Extreme Depression. Out of 100% of male respondents, 2% were in

Mild Mood Disturbance, 4% were in Borderline Clinical Depression, 46% were in Moderate Depression, 44% were in Severe Depression, and 4% were in Extreme Depression. The data does not represent a very significant difference in depression status across genders in the pre-test and shows that males and females are generally depressed alike.

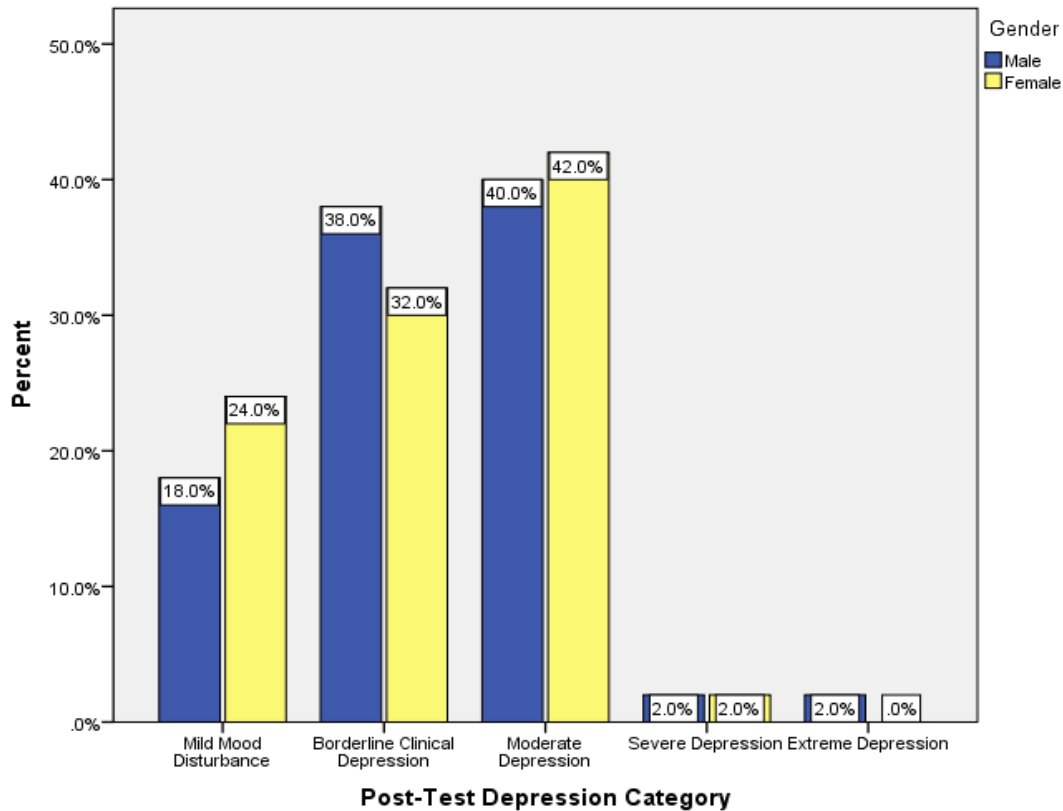


Figure 5.1.9 Post-Test Depression Status Category with Respect to Gender

Interpretation

This graph shows the post-test depression status category with respect to gender. In the post-test, out of 100% of female respondents, 24% were converted to Mild Mood Disturbance, 32% were converted to Borderline Depression, 42% were in Moderate Depression, 2% were in Severe Depression, and 0% were in Extreme Depression. In the post-test, out of 100% of male respondents,

18% were converted to Mild Mood Disturbance, 38% were converted to Borderline Clinical Depression, 40% were in Moderate Depression, 2% were in Severe Depression, and 2% were in Extreme Depression. The data does not represent a very significant difference in depression status across genders in the post-test and shows that males and females are generally depressed alike.

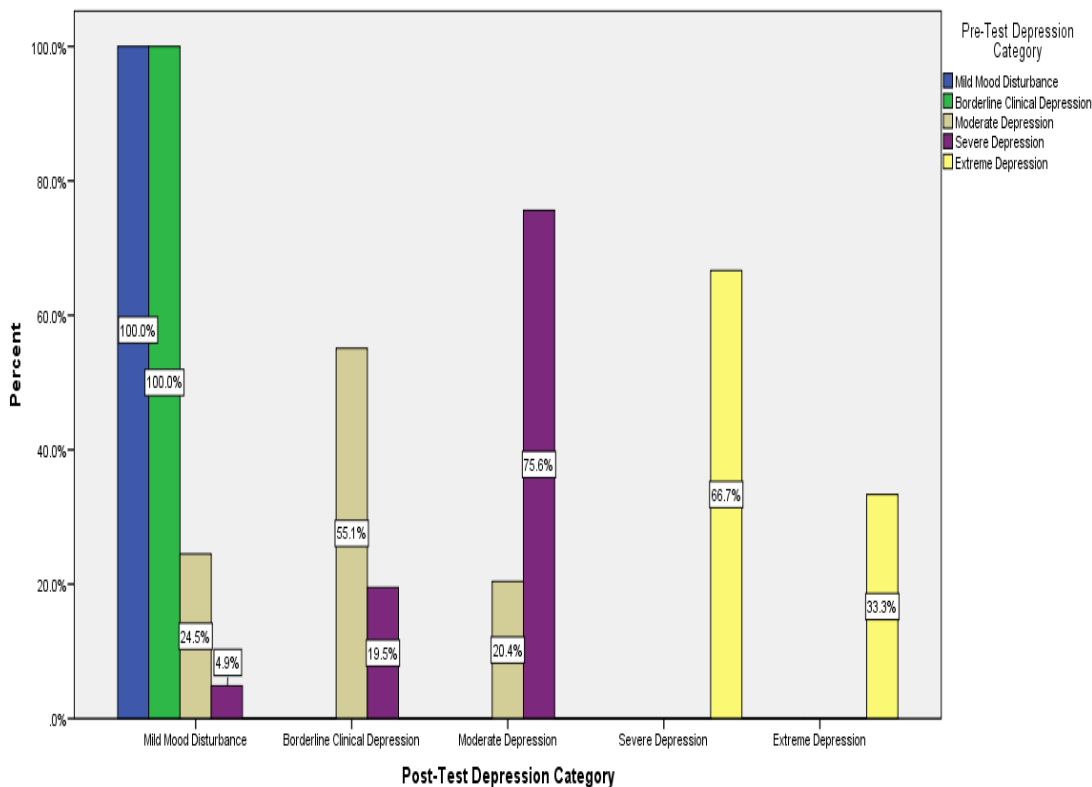


Figure 5.1.10 Conversion of Depression Status from Pre-Test to Post-Test

Interpretation

This Figure 5.1.10 graph shows the conversion of one depression state in the pre-test to another depression state after the stimulus in post-testing. According to the Beck Depression Inventory, there are a total of six states of depression:

1. Normal
2. Mild Mood Disturbance
3. Borderline Clinical Depression
4. Moderate Depression
5. Severe Depression
6. Extreme Depression

No respondent was found in the Normal category in pre-testing or post-testing; therefore, it is not reflected in the graph. The 100% of respondents who were in Mild Mood Disturbance remained 100% in Mild Mood Disturbance. Out of 100% of respondents who were in Borderline Depression in the pre-test, 100% converted to Mild Mood Disturbance in the post-test. Out of

100% of respondents who were in Moderate Depression in the pre-test, 24.5% converted to Mild Mood Disturbance, 55.1% converted to Borderline Depression, and 20.4% remained in Moderate Depression. Out of 100% of respondents who were in Severe Depression in the pre-test, 75.6% converted to Moderate Depression, 19.5% converted to Borderline Depression, while 4.9% converted to Mild Mood Disturbance in post-testing. Out of 100% of respondents who were in Extreme Depression, 33.3% remained in the same state, while 66.7% converted to Severe Depression in the post-test.

9. 5.2 Hypothesis Testing Hypothesis

Following is the hypothesis of this study:

H₁: Watching sitcoms reduces the depression

H₀: Watching sitcoms does not have any impact on the depression.

T-Test

Paired Samples Statistics

| | Mean | N | Std. Deviation | Std. Error Mean |
|--------------------------------|-------|-----|----------------|-----------------|
| Pair 1 Pre-Test BDI Depression | 29.47 | 100 | 5.250 | .525 |
| Post-Test BDI Depression | 20.34 | 100 | 4.736 | .474 |

Paired Samples Test

| | Paired Differences | | | | | T | df | Sig. (2-tailed) |
|--|--------------------|----------------|-----------------|---|-------|--------|----|-----------------|
| | Mean | Std. Deviation | Std. Error Mean | 95% Confidence Interval of the Difference | | | | |
| | | | | Lower | Upper | | | |
| Pair 1 Pre-Test BDI Depression Post-Test BDI Depression | 9.130 | 3.410 | .341 | 8.453 | 9.807 | 26.773 | 99 | .000 |

Since the p-value is less than 5%, with a confidence interval of 95%, we reject the null hypothesis and conclude that exposure to sitcoms reduces depression.

6 .Discussion and Analysis

Stress, depression and anxiety are major and commonly reported issues among college students. Mostly, stress and depression among college youth are caused by their educational and academic performance. Usually, stress, depression and anxiety are associated with a decrease in grades, which affects students' skills and ability to perform in one way or another. There are various reasons why stress occurs among students. First and foremost is the fear of academic excellence; often, students fear getting lower marks than expected. This is quite widespread, as practically, marks will always be lower than what is expected. Other stresses might be due to the changing environment from high school to college and being away from home. It has been observed that stress, anxiety and depression among students in the second year are much higher than they were in the first year. This is primarily due to the increase in the load and complexities of the subjects to be learned. (Eisenberg D, 2007)



The research intends to answer the objectives of this study: to investigate how sitcoms reduce the depression of university students; to explore the nature of pleasure they seek to reduce depression; and to find whether there is any difference of effects in males and females. The study suggests that exposure to sitcoms reduces depression among university students. In this study, the researcher used the Beck Depression Inventory as a tool to understand the data. This research study basically describes the effect of sitcoms on reducing the depression of university students. The researcher studied the objectives of the study and applied a paired t-test to analyze the hypothesis.

RQ 1: How sitcoms reduce the depression of university students?

A significant deviation was observed from pre-test to post-test in the depression level of university students with the effect of the sitcom stimulus. Results of pre-testing revealed that 3% of overall respondents were in Mild Mood Disturbance, 4% were in Borderline Clinical Depression, 49% were

in Moderate Depression, 41% were in Severe Depression, and 3% were in Extreme Depression. However, post-test results were very encouraging. After exposure to the stimulus, 21% of respondents were observed in the BDI depression category of Mild Mood Disturbance, 35% were observed in Borderline Clinical Depression, 41% were observed in Moderate Depression, 2% in Severe Depression, and 1% in Extreme Depression. It shows a major conversion from a higher depression BDI state to a lower depression BDI state before and after exposure to the sitcom.

RQ 2: What is the nature of pleasure that the university students seek to reduce the depression? Sitcom is basically a part of entertainment media that is used by viewers for entertainment. According to Uses and Gratification Theory (UGT), viewers use media to gratify their needs. It is evident from the fact that the BDI depression category was reduced in 86% of the respondents and remained the same in only 14% of respondents. Most encouragingly, none of the respondents reported an increase in depression. Students use the media to gratify the need for relaxation, and it helps in reducing depression.

RQ 3: Is there any difference of effects in males and females?

A minor difference in BDI depression states was seen among males and females in pre-testing and post-testing across the board. In the pre-test, out of 100% of female respondents, 4% were in Mild Mood Disturbance, 4% were in Borderline Clinical Depression, 46% were in Moderate Depression, 44% were in Severe Depression, and 4% were in Extreme Depression. Out of 100% of male respondents, 2% were in Mild Mood Disturbance, 4% were in Borderline Clinical Depression, 46% were in Moderate Depression, 44% were in Severe Depression, and 4% were in Extreme Depression.

In the post-test, out of 100% of female respondents, 24% were converted to Mild Mood Disturbance, 32% were converted to Borderline Depression, 42% were in Moderate Depression, 2% were in Severe Depression, and 0% were in Extreme Depression. In the post-test, out of 100% of male respondents, 18% were converted to Mild

Mood Disturbance, 38% were converted to Borderline Clinical Depression, 40% were in Moderate Depression, 2% were in Severe Depression, and 2% were in Extreme Depression. These results prove that viewers seek a kind of psychological support from sitcoms, irrespective of their gender. The types of gratification were emotional, hopefulness, and learning, based on diversion, personal relationships, personal identity, and surveillance.

7. Conclusion

The results of this study show that exposure to sitcoms reduces depression among university students. As the researcher used the Beck Depression Inventory and the experimental method based on pre-testing, stimulus, and post-testing, the results of this study show a major conversion from a higher depression BDI state to a lower depression BDI state before and after exposure to the sitcom. These results prove that viewers seek a kind of psychological support from sitcoms. The types of gratification that participants of the research obtained were emotional, hopefulness, and learning, based on diversion, personal relationships, personal identity, and surveillance. According to this study, it is evident that students use this media to gratify the need for relaxation, and it helps in reducing depression.

10. 8. Recommendations

The researcher recommends that in further studies, the researcher must take into account other levels of education. The research can be widened to international students and must find out the effect of sitcoms from other countries. Further researchers can apply the research to different modes of media, such as movies and web series. The wider research would help to explore different aspects of the topic area.

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