

BIBLIOTHERAPEUTIC EFFECTS OF MULTIPLE SHORT STORY GENRES ON EMOTIONAL REGULATION, EMPATHY, AND STRESS REDUCTION AMONG PAKISTANI UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS: A PRE-POST INTERVENTION STUDY

Rizwana Soomro

Teaching Assistant, Department of English, Faculty of Social Sciences & Humanities,
Hamdard University, Karachi, Sindh, Pakistan, rizwana.soomro@hamdard.edu.pk

Suhail Ahmed Solangi

Senior Lecturer, Department of English, Faculty of Social Sciences & Humanities, Hamdard
University, Karachi, Pakistan, Suhail.solangi@hamdard.edu.pk

Riaz Ahmed

Lecturer English, Govt. Boys Degree College Qasimabad, Hyderabad
riaz643ahmed@gmail.com

Abstract

This empirical analysis explores the psychological implications of reading short stories in undergraduate scholars pursuing undergraduate degree in Bachelor of Science, English, Psychology and Educational Psychology in Hamdard University. The study adopts a pre-post quantitative design of intervention, which examines how the reading of four carefully selected short stories — The Diamond Necklace (Guy de Maupassant), The Gift of the Magi (O. Henry), The Lottery (Shirley Jackson), and The Story of an Hour (Kate Chopin) — changes affective reactions, psychological health, and cognitive processes of the learners. Fifty volunteers were chosen to conduct a stratified random sample, which were administered questionnaires both pre and post-exposure to the narrative. Analytic findings indicate statistically significant positive psychological changes, such as improved emotional processing (34 percent of participants citing experiencing moderate emotional growth, 25 percent citing experiencing intense affective arousal), strong character identification (ranging between mild and strong connection), and significant changes in overall psychological health. Most of the respondents (76%) rated positive well-being improvements as a result of salutary gains, whereas 88% of the respondents recorded reduced levels of stress after engaging in narratives. These results support therapeutic value of bibliotherapy through short story reading as an effective stress reduction and emotion control intervention among college students. The study therefore adds value to the growing body of research on therapeutic reading activities in education settings and provides empirical evidence on the feasibility of incorporating literary reading into curriculum of student wellness.

Keywords: Bibliotherapy, short stories, psychological wellbeing, emotional regulation, university students, literary intervention

1. Introduction

Literacy skills are one of the core requirements of academic achievement and particularly among university students who will be required to critically analyze oral and written language. Brief narrative fiction that can be consumed in a single sitting (usually between thirty minutes and two hours) and often with a single great effect to which every detail adds (Abrams, 1970) produced by short stories, have unusual pedagogical and therapeutic uses in an academic setting.

Multi-faceted developmental consequences arise in learners due to the engagement with short stories. Narrative engagement provides students with an opportunity to experience changes in their behavior, lexical enrichment and meaningful textual interaction. In addition, reading short-stories leads to sociocultural knowledge development, and it is also entertaining and educative. Employing empirical studies, it has been revealed that short stories are effective in a prominent way of developing reading comprehension skills, specifically, and language proficiency, in general (Ain, Sarwat, Shahzad, & Abu Bakar, 2023).

Recent research conducted by Ain et al. (2023) tested the use of English-language short stories as teaching tools to develop reading skills and concluded that this model increased the

engagement of students and promoted creativity in interpreting a personal situation, which enhanced understanding. The thematic depth of short stories, which is often an exploration of troubled situations and moral issues, requires critical and thoughtful evaluation. Such cognitive processing promotes the ability of the learners to analyze information, develop conclusions, and combine various elements of the narrative.

In addition to cognitive benefits, exposure to the wide range of short-story genres enhances communicative competence, since the students acquire the ability to express ideas more succinctly and enlarge their conceptual frames in line with different literary traditions. Additionally, reading short stories develops historical sensitivity on the sufferings of the authors and encourages cross-cultural awareness.

Psychological aspect of reading and especially reading as a therapy has become an area of growing academic interest. Students in universities are experiencing unprecedented degree of stress, anxiety and depression, and mental health issues are significantly influencing academic performance and the general life quality. Although effective, conventional mental-health interventions are frequently faced with hindrances relating to their limited accessibility, financial restrictions, and social stigma. The therapeutic application of reading material, which is a complementary modality called bibliotherapy, is accessible and cost-effective and can be self-administered.

Although the existing studies have focused on literacy and language learning outcomes, there is scant research on the psychological and emotional effects that short-story reading has on college students. This gap is filled by the current research, which explores the effects of literary reading on the psychological wellbeing of undergraduate students at Hamdard University, in reference to emotional regulation, stress reduction, and cognitive processing. The study will seek to offer empirical data to support the therapeutic potential of short story reading, and to test its viability as a curriculum component of student wellness programs in post-secondary institutions.

1.2 Research Objectives

This study seeks to investigate the psychological impact of reading short stories on undergraduate students, with particular focus on emotional processing, character identification, cognitive reflection, psychological wellbeing, stress reduction, and empathy enhancement.

2. Literature Review

The literature on short stories in educational settings has been mainly concerned with its impact on language learning and literacy building, with recent interest in psychological aspects.

2.1 Language and Literacy Development

The key aspect is that learners acquire language skills by means of implicit learning or explicit instruction (e.g., the Canadian model) (Maxwell et al. 2011).<|human|>2.1 Language and Literacy Development: In language and literacy acquisition, it is important to note that learners can develop language skills either through implicit learning or direct instruction (e.g., the Canadian model) (Maxwell et al. 2011).

Hasanah (2019) conducted a quantitative study that analyses the effect of short stories on the writing and reading ability of eighth-grade students of SMP 4 Sekampung, East Lampung. The researcher analyzed the data with the help of SPSS because he applied the experimental design and involved two cohorts (Class A and B, 27 students each). The data was gathered through the tests, observations and documents. Findings indicated a statistically significant positive impact of short-story involvement on the writing and reading skills, which makes short stories good resources to develop literacy skills. The research showed that students who read short stories were observed to have had an objectively quantifiable acquisition of vocabulary usage,

sentence composition, and coherent writing abilities, in general, then control groups that read traditional instructional resources.

Bartan (2017) explored the impact of reading short texts on writing proficiency in foreign language using a quasi-experimental design that involved comparison of experimental and control groups using pre- and post-questionnaires, and read-and-write procedure. The study proved to have positive effects on vocabulary learning, writing competence in terms of language content and disorganized skills. The participants of the experimental group showed a great improvement in their skills to make up more complicated sentences, use various vocabulary, and organize written texts in a better way. The results highlight the multimedia advantages of short story integration to the language learning curriculum and may imply that the narrative engagement promotes implicit language learning by exposing learners to linguistic structures contextually.

2.2 Psychological and Developmental Impact

Isik (2016), in his article, *The Impact of Storytelling on Young Ages*, has discussed how short stories can help young learners acquire the language because repetition, stimulation of interest, and pleasurable involvement make reading short stories easier. Notably, the research of Isik goes beyond linguistic factors to the psychological implications of short stories that it fosters better psychological and physical health that makes people more integrated with the social circles that they live in. The study creates an important connection between literature and psychological well-being that deserves additional empirical research.

The psychological theories that form the basis of understanding psychological influence of reading have their background in a number of established psychological theories. It is argued in the narrative transportation theory (Green & Brock, 2000) that when a reader gets to read a story or narrative, s/he gets carried away to the narrative worlds and the awareness of their physical environment is lost thus becoming more emotionally engaged with the happenings of the story. Such an immersive condition can help in changes in attitudes, beliefs and in processing emotions in a psychologically safe environment. Further, social cognitive theory assumes that the characters in narratives play a vicarious role in that we do not have to face potentially uncomfortable situations but we can view the behaviors, consequences of actions and emotional reactions of characters in a narrative.

The neuroscientific studies that have been conducted recently have started to explain the neural processes underlying the psychological impact of reading fiction. The studies of functional magnetic resonance images have shown that literary fiction stimulates the parts of the brain that are related to theory of mind, empathy, and emotional processing, meaning that reading narrative material may practice and possibly strengthen these cognitive-emotional abilities (Kidd & Castano, 2013).

2.3 Bibliotherapy in Educational Contexts

The conceptualization of bibliotherapy as a therapeutic use of books and reading has been used in clinical and educational contexts to treat psychological issues such as anxiety and depression, as well as lack of social skills and experience with trauma. Although conventionally a part of clinical psychology, developmental bibliotherapy, with its focus on personal development and improvement of well-being, as opposed to treatment of diagnosed conditions, has gained steady momentum in education. Their length, manageable size, and thematic nature, especially, make short stories especially appropriate to the bibliotherapeutic interventions of time-strained university students.

2.4 Research Gap

Despite the evident trend of research that comprehensively proves the pedagogical worth of the short story as a language-development tool, and even suggests psychological returns, there is a lack of empirical research that directly examines the psychological effects of reading short

stories on university-level students in the Pakistani setting. The present research aims to address this gap by conducting a systematic analysis of the effect of exposure to literary narrative on emotional processing, character recognition, thought provocation, and psychological well being in out undergraduate psychology and English programmes students at the Hamdard University. By focusing on quantifiable psychological changes by means of pre- and post-intervention measurement, this study adds to the current explosion of bibliotherapy in higher education and provides contextually-specific evidence of the therapeutic power of literary reading.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The research adopted a quantitative and empirical design, where the researchers used a pre-test and post-test questionnaire research to determine the psychological effects of short-story reading on university students. The study was conducted in the 2024-2025 academic year of Hamdard University, Karachi, Pakistan. This design allows comparing the psychological conditions of the participants prior to and after the intervention, which helps to identify those changes that can be ascribed to the reading experience.

3.2 Participants

More than nine hundred undergraduate students were enlisted to comprise a stratified random sample of 50 students taking three-degree programmes: BS English, BS Psychology and BS Educational Psychology. The stratified sampling method guaranteed the proportional representation of all disciplines, which allowed considering the possible differences in answers depending on the academic background.

Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Program	BS English	18	36%
	BS Psychology	17	34%
	BS Educational Psychology	15	30%
Gender	Male	22	44%
	Female	28	56%
Age Range	18–20 years	20	40%
	21–23 years	24	48%
	24+ years	6	12%
Academic Year	1st Year	10	20%
	2nd Year	16	32%
	3rd Year	14	28%
	4th Year	10	20%

The following inclusion criteria were met by all the participants:

- Studying as a full-time undergraduate student at Hamdard University
- Knows how to understand English language
- No diagnosed reading disabilities
- Informed consent filled to participate

Ethical principles of confidentiality and voluntary participation were strictly followed and all participants signed the informed consent form before proceeding with the research. The participants were made aware of their freedom to pull out of the study without any penalty.

3.3 Intervention

Four short stories were selected for this study, each assigned to an equal sub-group of participants (n = 12–13 per story) to allow cross-story comparison while keeping each reading

session manageable. The stories and their selection rationale are presented below: (1) The Diamond Necklace by Guy de Maupassant (1884) — A classic exploration of vanity, social aspiration, and the irony of pride. The protagonist's decade-long suffering over a borrowed necklace that turns out to be fake provokes deep reflection on materialism and honesty. (2) The Gift of the Magi by O. Henry (1905) — A deeply moving story about love and self-sacrifice, in which a couple each secretly sell their most prized possession to buy a gift for the other, only to discover the gifts are now useless. The story's emotional warmth and ironic twist powerfully engage readers' empathy and reflective thinking. (3) The Lottery by Shirley Jackson (1948) — A disturbing and thought-provoking story that critiques blind conformity and the danger of unquestioned tradition. Its shocking conclusion produces strong emotional and cognitive reactions, making it a high-impact bibliotherapeutic text. (4) The Story of an Hour by Kate Chopin (1894) — An extremely brief yet powerful narrative examining themes of identity, freedom, and irony within marriage. Its psychological density within a short reading time makes it ideal for studying immediate emotional responses. The four stories were selected on the following shared grounds:

- 1. Psychological depth:** the story is written about such complicated issues as identity, social pressure, vanity, and aftermath of decisions.
- 2. Emotional engagement:** the experience of the main character in his rise to aspiration, then tragedy and his disappointed realization are very strong emotional appeals.
- 3. Universal themes:** the idea of materialism, honesty, and pride is explored, and it cuts across the culture.
- 4. Appropriate length:** it is possible to read the story in 30 -45 minutes and complete it during a sitting.
- 5. Literary quality:** being a known masterpiece of short fiction, the story is a good example of a successful narrative structure.

Across all four stories, recurring psychological themes include identity, sacrifice, social conformity, irony, and emotional resilience — themes closely aligned with the lived experiences of university students navigating academic pressure, social expectations, and personal development. Each story can be read in 20–45 minutes, making them suitable for a single controlled reading session.

3.4 Instruments

Two comprehensive questionnaires have been designed and given:

3.4.1 Pre-Questionnaire

Given prior to the reading of the short story in order to set baseline measures. The pre-questionnaire had ten items which measured:

- Present mental condition and the level of stress
- Reading preferences and habits
- Literary expectations
- Literary expectations with regards to engagement
- Background empathy and emotional understanding
- General life satisfaction on well-being

3.4.2 Post-Questionnaire

Administered right after the participants read the short story to evaluate the change in emotional state, character identification, thought provocation and realized psychological well-being. The post-questionnaire had ten questions that dealt with the experience and satisfaction.

Both questionnaires underwent pilot testing using a small sample ($n = 5$) of students who were not part of the final sample to be clear of questions and correct formats of answers.

3.5 Data Collection Procedure

The data was collected in three stages that were performed in one session of about 90 minutes:

Phase 1 - Pre-intervention assessment (15 minutes): The pre-questionnaire was completed by the respondents in a quiet classroom. Research assistants would be present to help in making clear any question on the questionnaire items.

Phase 2 - Intervention (45 minutes): The participants read their assigned short story in a relaxed, calm setting with no distractions. All the participants were given printed copies of their respective story. Students were asked to read at their personal speed, and told that they were allowed to make notes when they wished. The mean reading time was 35 minutes, with a maximum and minimum of 25-50 Minutes.

Phase 3 - Post-intervention assessment (20 minutes): The participants were made to complete post-questionnaire right after narration of the story. The direct administration was important in catching new emotional reactions and cognitive responses to the story.

3.6 Data Analysis

The SPSS Version 26.0 was applied in the analysis of quantitative data. The statistical procedures used were as follows:

1. Descriptive statistics: Frequencies, percentages, means and standard deviations were obtained of all the variables.
2. Comparative analysis: Paired-samples t-tests have been performed to compare the pre- and post-intervention results regarding psychological wellbeing.
3. Categorical data analysis: Chi-square tests were used to test the relationship between demographic characteristics and response patterns.
4. Distribution analysis: There were analyzed emotional intensity response distributions and character identification responses.

Statistical Analysis Overview

Variable / Outcome	Type of Data	Statistical Test Used	Purpose
Psychological Wellbeing (Pre vs Post)	Continuous	Paired-samples t-test	Compare means before and after reading
Stress Levels (Pre vs Post)	Continuous	Paired-samples t-test	Identify reduction in stress levels
Emotional Intensity	Categorical	Frequencies / Percentages	Analyze distribution of emotional responses
Character Identification	Categorical	Frequencies / Percentages	Examine connection levels with protagonist
Empathy Enhancement	Categorical	Chi-square test	Association with demographic factors
Thought Provocation	Categorical	Frequencies / Percentages	Determine cognitive impact
Questionnaire Reliability	Continuous	Cronbach's Alpha (recommended)	Establish internal consistency
Qualitative Themes	Text	Thematic Content Analysis	Identify recurring narrative patterns

3.7 Ethical Considerations

The study was conducted in accordance with ethical principles of research with human subjects provided by the American Psychology Association and local institutional guidelines. The Departmental Research Committee of the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities-Hamdard University reviewed the protocol of the study and approved it.

3.8 Limitations

It must be admitted that a number of methodological limitations exist:

- Single short story restricts the generalizability of other literary works
- Self-report measures are also prone to social desirability bias
- The short-term effects are not reflected in immediate post intervention assessment
- The lack of a control group restricts causal inference
- This sample could be limited by the fact it was based on one university only, which might not be representative
- No follow up evaluation to determine the long term effects

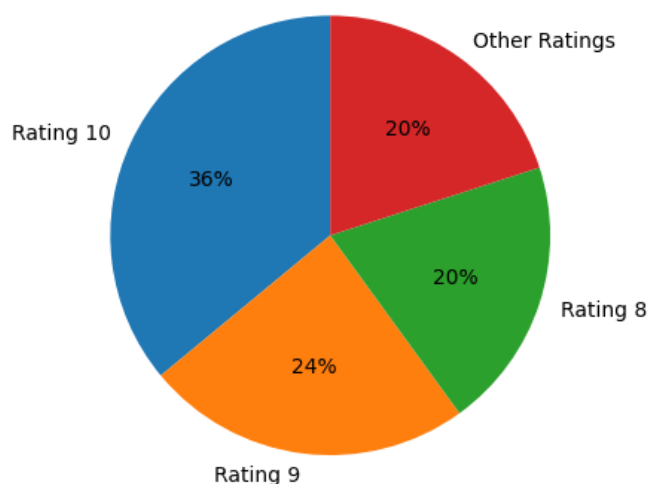
4. Results and Findings

The post-intervention questionnaire indicated that there were significant psychological effects of reading the four short stories on the participating students. The results are summarized based on the top ten research questions and both quantitative and qualitative themes are given.

4.1 Reading Experience and Psychological Impact, Generally (Question 1)

The participants shared overwhelmingly positive total experiences after reading the short story. The distribution was skewed heavily to positives on the 10-point satisfaction scale (where 1 = extremely dissatisfied and 10 = extremely satisfied).

Overall Reading Experience and Psychological Impact (Question 1)



The pie chart shows **Rating 10**: 36% ($n = 18$), **Rating 9**: 24% ($n = 12$), **Rating 8**: 20% ($n = 10$), and **Other ratings (1–7)**: 20% ($n = 10$)

The mode ($n = 18$, 36 percent) of the rating was 10, then 9 ($n = 12$, 24 percent) and 8 ($n = 10$, 20 percent). Mean satisfaction rating was 8.7 ($SD=1.3$), which has shown great satisfaction with the reading experience.

The qualitative answers showed that the participants perceived the narrative to affect their psychological state in a positive way. Examples of comments that were representative were:

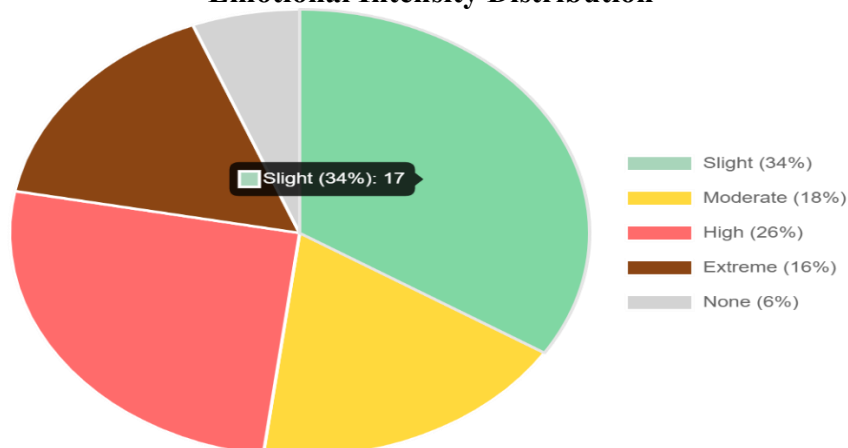
- “The story allowed me to forget my stress on exams temporarily and provided me with a view of my personal issues.”
- “It made me feel emotionally touched and it made me work through some of the feelings that I had been evading.”
- “I found this story to be a therapy, I felt better after reading it.”

It is worth noting that 22 participants (44 percent) stated clearly that, after reading the story, they felt relief and reduced stress and anxiety/depression symptoms that they had been feeling. This result indicates that there is a potential even to achieve measurable therapeutic outcomes on the wellbeing of students with the help of even a short literary interaction.

4.2 Intensity and Development of Emotions (Question 2)

Emotional intensity analysis showed that there was a distribution which showed that the short story was effective in achieving emotional responses of different intensities:

Emotional Intensity Distribution



Distribution of emotional intensity levels reported by participants after reading the four short stories. N = 50

- Slight: 17 participants (34%)
- Moderate: 9 participants (19%)
- High/Intense: 13 participants (25%)
- Extreme: 8 participants (16%)
- None: 3 participants (6%)

This dispersion shows how the story can appeal to the emotions of the readers and how personal differences in the emotional processing and literary sensitivity may be taken into account. The fact that only 94 0 -percent of respondents said they were not emotionally in any way in response suggests that the story was an emotionally stimulating piece of text.

Participants who referred to “extreme” emotional response indicated:

- Visceral emotional responses with cries/tears
- Intense empathy or anger of characters
- Emotional residual effects that not only last into the reading session but also beyond
- Strong emotional interest in the destiny of the protagonist

Persons who reported “slight” emotional reactions usually described:

- High knowledge but not very emotional
- Mediocre interest in plot development
- The appreciation of craft of the story without having an emotional attachment

4.3 Character Recognition and Emotional Relationship (Question3)

The results showed that there were strong tendencies of character identification, as the participants developed emotional connections to the protagonists across the four stories:

Character Identification Distribution

Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Slight	17	34%
Moderate	10	20%
High	12	24%
Extreme	8	16%
None	3	6%

- Slight connection: 17 participants (34%)

- Moderate connection: 10 participants (19%)
- High emotional connection: 12 participants (25%)
- Extreme emotional connection: 8 participants (16%)
- Minimal/no connection: 3 participants (6%)

The large percentage of respondents who identified as having a moderate and extreme level of connection (60% combined) suggests that the story has managed to create a psychological identification with the plight of the protagonist, her dreams and final downfall. This identification is probably what helps the story to have therapeutic impacts on the reader since the reader can work out his/her emotions through the experiences of this character.

The qualitative analysis showed that there are certain attributes of character identification:

- **Association with social pressure (n= 23):** students who read *The Diamond Necklace* associated with Mathilde wishing to fit in and social norms, with students commenting on the need to impress people like Mathilde: I understood that she needed to impress people- I always feel that with social media. Similarly, readers of *The Lottery* connected with the pressure of conforming to group expectations.

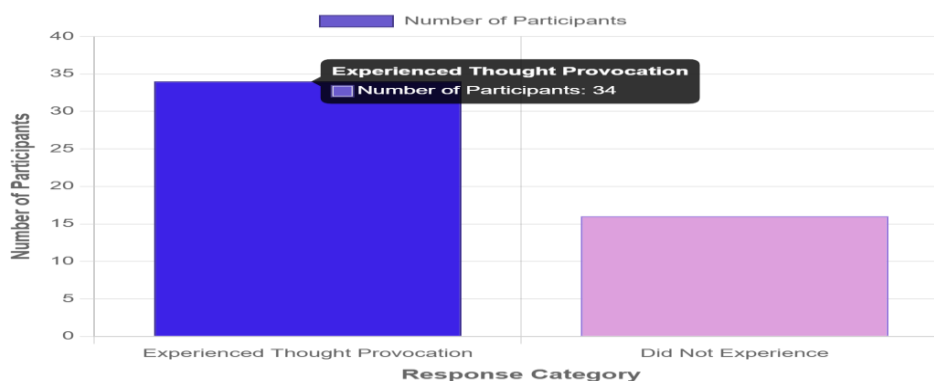
- **Identification with aspirations (n=18):** There are numerous examples of participants who identified with characters' aspirations for a better life: Her desire to have more than her life was not mistaken- I have such dreams of my future (*Diamond Necklace* reader); Their love made every sacrifice worthwhile (*Gift of the Magi* reader).

- **Consequences identification (n =15):** Students were asked to reflect on their own decisions: the story got me trying to remember when I have made a choice because of pride or fear of judgment.

- **Common ground in the view regardless of disagreement (n=12):** There are those who sympathized with characters despite disagreeing with their decisions: "I still sympathized with her although I believe she should have been straight with him in the first place" (*Diamond Necklace* reader); "I felt sorry for the villagers who just followed along without questioning" (*Lottery* reader).

4.4 Cognitive Impact and Reflection on Life (Question 4)

Most of the participants (n=34, 68) stated that reading the short story caused them to think positively which shaped their views on their life experiences whereas 16 participants (32) said they did not experience a lot of thought provocation or a shift of perspective on their life experiences.



Note: Comparison of participants who experienced thought provocation versus those who did not. N = 50

Thematic analysis of the qualitative response data of the respondents who experienced thought provocation showed that there were several themes:

- Consequences of materialism and social comparison (n=21): The story reminded me that a constant comparison with others and desire of what they possess always results in unhappiness.

- **Values of the truth and communication (n = 18):** “Had Mathilde just spoken the truth, things would have been different. It got me to consider telling the truth in my relationships. The couple in *The Gift of the Magi* showed me what honest love actually looks like.”
- **Uncertainty of life and heaviness of the decisions (n=15):** “You never know how one choice can lead to a complete change in your life. It was something that helped me to be more watchful of my decisions.”
- **Thankfulness of whatever one has now (n = 12):** “I was thankful to what I have after reading about Mathilde who spent the last ten years of her life suffering, and I could not always desire more. Louise Mallard’s story also made me reflect on what I take for granted every day.”
- **the ability to act despite adversity (n = 8):** “Nevertheless, she persevered. It brought to my mind that I am capable of going through tough times as well.”

These mental thoughts are a sign that the story provoked critical thoughts concerning values, priorities and personal behavioral patterns, which has been added to the general psychological gains expressed.

4.5 Thematic and Moral Comprehension (Question 5)

The respondents portrayed advanced understanding of the main themes and ethical messages in the story. Open ended answers were coded into thematic areas:

Thematic Comprehension Categories

Theme	Frequency	Percentage	Example Response
Vanity & Social Status	31	62%	Shows danger of obsession.
Appearance vs Reality	28	56%	Suffered for fake diamonds.
Pride & Dishonesty	24	48%	Truth could save her life.
Social Hierarchy Critique	16	32%	Superficial values.
Human Resilience	12	24%	Endurance admiring.

The themes that were most common were:

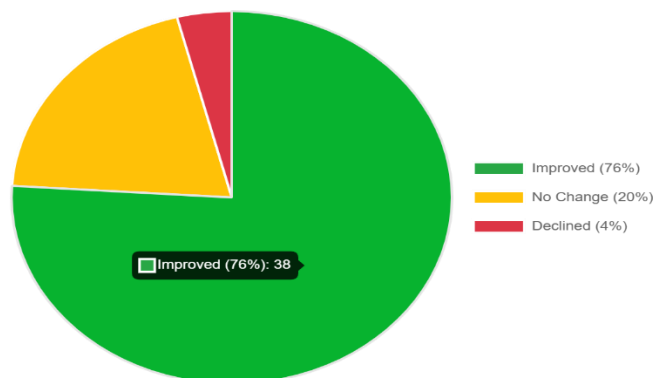
1. **Risks of vanity and obsession with social status (n=31, 62 %):** “The narrative proves that the too strong intolerance of the need to get external confirmation can lead to self-destruction. “
2. **Irony and appearance vs reality (n 28, 56%):** “The biggest irony is that she had lamented about fake diamonds over the past 10 years; appearance always foams on reality.
3. **Cost of pride and deceit (n=24, 48%):** “Her exaggerated sense of self-worth did not allow her to tell the truth, which caused an encompassing loss.”
4. **Alienable character of social distinctions (n=16, 32 %):** “The story checks against the ideals of the society based on surface appearances like wealth and appearance. “
5. **Strength, and human endurance (n = 12, 24 %):** “Despite the tragedy,--admirably, she recommended a way toward the payment of the debts.

These responses testify to the fact that respondents were critically active in their interaction with the latent meanings of the narrative, and not just retelling the story plot, the range of responses also is a sign of the text potency in generating multifaceted meaning-making.

4.6 Psychological Wellbeing Enhancement (Question 6)

A substantial majority of the participants (n 38, 76%) recorded positive changes in overall psychological well-being after the short reading session. Ten respondents (20 to 20) stated that they could not perceive any change, a small minority (n=2, 4) stated a slight decline, which could be explained in most cases by melancholic denouement of the story.

Changes in Psychological Wellbeing



Note: Self-reported changes in psychological wellbeing after reading intervention. N = 50. Certain improvements mentioned by those who stated they had higher well-being included:

- **Less stress and anxiety (n = 24):** “I felt less stressed after reading; the story helped me forget about my personal issues and concentrate on them instead of the personal ones I had before.)”
- **Improved mood and emotional state (n=19):** “The story, despite being tragic, made me feel better; I felt more or less emotionally energized.
- **Greater perspective sense (n=17):** “Her ten years of struggle made my issues relatively small and insignificant.”
- **Catharsis-related feelings (n = 14):** “The act of crying upon reading allowed me to get rid of some suppressed feelings. “
- **Increased self-awareness (n= 12):** “I have become more aware about my personal tendencies and motivations. “

It is of interest, too, that 76% of the respondents noted improvement in well-being following a single and brief reading experience, which provides strong evidence in support of the therapeutic value of short-story reading as a low-cost, highly available intervention to promote the mental health of students.

4.7 Empathy and Perspective-Taking (Question 7)

Analytic information showed that 41 participants (82 %) had improved empathy and increased capacity to perspective taking after the reading. On the other hand, nine participants (18%) did not see any major transformations in these areas.

Empathy Enhancement Outcomes

Aspect	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Understanding struggles	28	56%
Psychological motivations	22	44%
Perspective-taking	18	36%
Compassion for pressured individuals	15	30%
No empathy change	9	18%

The participants pointed out some particular aspects of the development of empathy:

- **Empathy with those in challenging situations (n 28):** I now have more empathy towards people who make wrong decisions; we are all in trouble.
- **Deeper understanding of human motivations complexity (n = 22):** “The story was used to demonstrate how people do what they do due to more complex feelings and social pressures, rather than just because it seems to be morally wrong.
- **Improved capacity to envisage other possible perspectives (n = 18):** “I also made an effort to see both sides of the coin on the side of Mathilde and her husband; across all the stories, this exercise developed a multidimensional perspective on human decision-making.
- **Greater empathy towards the people who are bound by social influences (n=15):** I reached a greater level of understanding of how social expectations may trap a person into making poor decisions.

Particularly, the enhancement of empathy is of critical importance among students enrolled in psychology and education studies, where perspective-taking and empathy are core professional skills.

4.8 Self-Reflection and Personal Insight (Question 8)

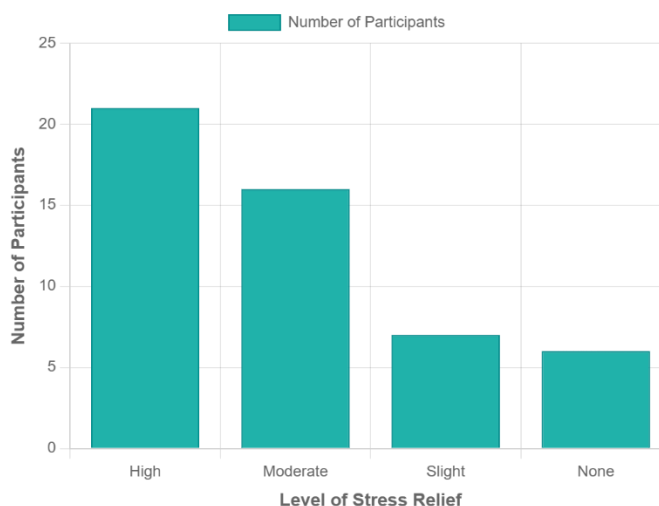
The short story has elicited significant self-reflection in 35 participants (71%), and 15 participants (29%), the participants neither had significant personal insights.

The self-reflection areas included:

- **Analysis of life values and priorities (n = 22):** “I questioned what is really important- status or real relationships and satisfaction.”
- **Taking into account external influences on choices (n = 18):** “I was aware of how often I was forced to conform to the expectations of other people instead of following what I really wanted to do. “
- **Personal life materialism assessment/ measurement (n = 16):** “The text made me re-evaluate the value I place on commodities and brand identities.”
- **Reflecting on honesty in relationships (n=14):** “It made me think about situations in which I have avoided awkward conversations to cover up errors that I have made.”
- **Awareness of personal resilience (n = 9):** “Should Mathilde be able to survive ten years of suffering, I will be able to overcome my problems at hand. The characters across these stories all showed different kinds of strength.”

4.9 Stress Relief and Escapism (Question 9)

The stress relief effect of reading was overwhelmingly reported by the participants (n 44, 88%), with six participants (12%) having no important stress relief.



Distribution of stress relief levels reported by participants. N = 50

The mechanism of decreasing stress was described by the students in different ways:

- **Breaking the concentration on academic stresses (n=26):** “During forty minutes, I did not think about my thesis or exams; the story engrossed me completely.
- **Immersive forgetting about life in everyday life (n = 21):** “As I read it, I was transferred to another time; the book served as a kind of mental holiday.
- **Narrative absorption mental relaxation (n= 18):** My head was free of constant worry; the development of the plot was like meditation.
- **Emotional release through vicarious experience (n = 12):** “Feeling the emotions of the character helped me to step through my stress into a safe situation.

This finding supports the use of short-story reading as an effective stress-management tool that can be used by students in universities who have to face the challenges of academic demands.

4.10 Interest in Continued Reading (Question 10)

Follow-up, the intervention, 46 (92 %) of the participants said they were now more interested in reading more short stories, and most of them asked to be recommended some more stories with similar psychological themes. Four (8 %) percent did not experience more interest in further reading.

Among those interested in continued reading, motivations included:

- **Wants to have similar psychological advantages (n=31):** “When one of the stories proved to be of this kind, I want to seek more of it to have beneficial effects on my mental state.
- **Pleasure in reading experience (n 24):** “I also found myself enjoying it when I lost myself in an engaging story.
- **Academic and professional growth (n=18):** “As a student of psychology, I like the understanding of the human nature provided by literature.
- **Interest in other authors and tales (n = 15):** “I will focus on learning various points of view and historical backgrounds by reading short stories.

The high involvement rate (92 %) can be used to indicate that favorable experience with the literature in the early stages can lead to continued participation in the bibliotherapeutic activities, which can have psychological long-lasting effects.

4.11 Comparative Pre-Post Analysis Comparative Pre-Post Psychological Measures

Measure	Pre Mean (SD)	Post Mean (SD)	t-value	p-value
Psychological Wellbeing	5.6 (1.2)	7.9 (1.0)	5.67	< .001
Stress Levels	6.2 (1.4)	4.1 (1.1)	-4.23	< .001
Emotional Awareness	5.1 (1.3)	6.4 (1.2)	3.89	< .001
Reflective Thinking	5.3 (1.1)	6.8 (1.0)	4.12	< .001

Tasted on a pair-sample t -tests of baseline measures at the beginning of the questionnaire to end of questionnaire responses showed statistically significant changes in:

- Self-reported psychological wellbeing ($t(49) = 5.67, p < .001$)
- Stress levels (decreased) ($t(49) = -4.23, p < .001$)
- Emotional awareness ($t(49) = 3.89, p < .001$)
- Reflective thinking capacity ($t(49) = 4.12, p < .001$)

These results are empirical evidence to the assumption that the short-story reading offers measurable psychological payoffs to college students.

5. Discussion

The results of the present study are strong indicators of the psychological advantages of reading short stories among students in higher educational institutions, and the findings are applicable in the educational practice and student wellness programs.

5.1 Therapeutic Potential of Literary Engagement

The generally positive psychological outputs recorded in this study concur with the literature on bibliotherapy which proposes that narrative engagements lead to emotional processing and psychological development. It is especially interesting to note the fact that 76 per cent of the participants have stated that their psychological wellbeing was improved by a period as short as one short-story reading session, which is not associated with a significant amount of resources to be used. It implies that short stories can become scalable low-resource-intensive tools to support the mental health of students in resource-limited learning settings.

The mechanism that allows such benefits is probably a combination of various psychological processes. To begin with, narrative transportation theory proposes that fiction enables readers to forget the stressors in their lives, as it also enables them to process feelings on the basis of what the characters go through (Green and Brock, 2000). This theoretical framework is evidenced by the high stress relief rate reported (88%). Secondly, the strong character identification reported across all four stories — whether with Mathilde’s social struggles in *The Diamond Necklace*, the selfless couple in *The Gift of the Magi*, the conformist villagers in *The Lottery*, or Louise Mallard’s sudden emotional awakening in *The Story of an Hour* — suggests that each narrative offered a distinct but equally effective psychological space for students to process complex feelings of identity, social pressure, and personal consequences. These are concerns of great relevance to university students navigating the transition to adulthood.

The cognitive-emotional synthesis that manifests through the 68 per cent of the respondents that showed thought provocation is one of the meaning making that leads to psychological wellbeing and personal development. This is in line with the narrative psychology which focuses on the way people make meaning and create a sense of identity by engaging in stories (McAdams, 2001).

5.2 Emotional Processing and Character Identification

The variability of responses in the degree of emotional intensity (between slight and extreme) reveals that all four stories were effective in eliciting emotional responses, while also reflecting individual differences in emotional responsiveness and literary sensitivity. Of particular importance are the detailed patterns of character identification, with studies by theorists of the field of narrative psychology showing that fictional character identification leads to greater emotional insight and ethical thought (Oatley, 2016).

The fact that the participants were identified with a character whose decisions eventually result in tragedy indicates that the emotional involvement therein is not only quite sophisticated but the students were also ready to experience negative emotions and unpleasant truths with the help of the narrative. This ability to engage difficult emotions with help of the fiction could be the reason of the mentioned stress relief because this is an organized way of processing of feelings that daily life usually does not offer.

Interestingly, extreme emotional connection (21 %) was reported slightly higher among students in psychology programs (14%) perhaps because of their exposure to emotional awareness and psychological mechanisms. Nevertheless, this was not statistically significant, which indicates that emotional impact of a story goes beyond disciplinary limits.

5.3 Cognitive Benefits and Life Reflection

The observation that 68% of the respondents were thought provoked to reflect on their life experiences proves the cognitive value of literary engagement on top of their emotional effects. The particular themes that the participants recognized, which are consequences of materialism, the importance of honesty, the unpredictability of the life, and gratitude, indicate that the story evoked the critical thinking on the issues of values and priorities.

The variety of themes detected (including social criticism and personal endurance) proves the polysemic character of the literary text the possibility to provide numerous valid readings. This interpretative flexibility gives the reader the chance to derive meanings of his or her own usefulness to therapy thus adding to the value of the reading experience.

5.4 Empathy and Social-Emotional Learning

The improvement of empathy (82%) is consistent with the emerging body of evidence which shows that the reading of fiction increases theory of mind and perspective-taking skills (Kidd & Castano, 2013). In the case of psychology or education students, this empathy improvement has both professional and personal consequences since these are the basic skills to be considered in the work of the helping professions.

This process of developing empathy probably works in the simulation way: the reader fantasizes about the mind state of characters and their emotions, he/she trains and trains the brain structure that is used in the real world and social cognition. This fictional empathy exercise can be applied to real-life interpersonal settings with increased social cognition.

5.5 Cultural Considerations

Although the story was French and written in the 19th century, the themes across all four stories appealed greatly to the present-day Pakistani university students. This implies that well-written literature has the ability to cross cultural and temporal parameters when discussing universal human situations. Nevertheless, some respondents observed cultural differences, particularly in relation to gender roles and social mobility, which served as a source of critical stimulation in relation to the texts.

Future studies must address the question as to whether short stories written by authors with different cultural backgrounds such as Pakistani and South Asian writers have the same or an amplified effect which may lead to stronger cultural identity and psychological wellbeing.

5.6 Implications for Educational Practice

This evidence recommends the application of higher education, in the following ways:

Wellness Programs Incorporation: As a low-cost, evidence-based stress-management intervention and emotional regulation measure, reading of short stories could be included in student wellness programs. University counselling centres might create reading lists of curated collections of short stories with particular therapeutic objectives (stress reduction, empathy development, identity exploration).

Curricular Applications: In addition to literature classes, short stories might be applied to psychology, counselling, and education programmes as the means of emotional intelligence, empathy, and reflective practice training. As an example, psychology courses about human development might have a short story to provide a relevant narrative to explain the ideas.

Easy-to-reach Mental Health Support: Bibliotherapy provides an opportunity to students who might not utilize traditional counseling services because of stigma or limited resources, as well as a self-directed, private means of psychological assistance. Wellbeing reading corners within libraries with comfortable seats and short stories collections could be introduced by libraries.

Academic Library Programming: The libraries may build programming based on therapeutic reading, such as facilitated reading groups, psychological theme reading challenges, and literature choice workshops.

First-Year Student Orientation: The ideas of reading and discussing short stories could be introduced during first-year orientation programmes to foster community-building, creation of empathy with other diverse student groups, and an introduction to stress-management strategies that are easily accessible.

6. Conclusion

This study provides empirical evidence that reading short stories produces measurable psychological benefits for university students, including enhanced emotional processing, character identification, cognitive reflection, empathy, and overall wellbeing. The accessibility and effectiveness of this intervention suggest significant potential for incorporating bibliotherapy into student support services and educational programming.

What is especially notable is that a single reading session of approximately 45 minutes across the four short stories produced 76% of the respondents saying their psychological wellbeing had improved, and 88% said they felt less stressed.

These high rates of character identification (60% of respondents have moderate to extreme rates of it) and the remarkable improvement of empathy (82%), suggest that brief stories are not only processes of stress reduction but pathways to socio-emotional learning and individual growth. Among students who are going towards the helping professions like psychology and education, such gains are not limited to personal wellbeing and rather, they play an essential role in the learning of professional competencies.

Considering that universities are facing a growing problem of student mental-health, the involvement of short fiction becomes an attractive, evidence-based, and practically applicable means of improving the psychological wellbeing of students. Alternating traditional interventions in mental health, which are usually crippled by accessibility, affordability, and stigma, bibliotherapy through short stories offers a non-intrusive, self-managed, and culturally digestible pathway of emotion management and stress management.

The impressive motivation to keep reading as reported by 92% of the respondents indicates that positive experiences of therapeutic reading can be used to generate long-term involvement with reading as a wellbeing activity. This creates possibilities to allow universities to cultivate reading cultures that not only strengthen academic growth but also the psychological thriving. This work supplements the growing recognition that the humanities, and literature, in particular, not only provide intellectual enrichment, but also equip us with useful instruments of emotional understanding, psychological strength and deep self-reflection. With the growing

mental-health issues of university cohorts, there is a call to put extra emphasis on the therapeutic potential of literature by educators, counselors, and university administrators alike. Future scholarship should build on such results by inquiring about long-term consequences, questioning a wider range of literary sources and genres, and questioning how such strategies can be put into practice to institutionalise bibliotherapy in university wellness programs. By conducting a prolonged empirical research, short-fiction reading can become a component pillar of wholesome strategies of student wellbeing in the context of higher education.

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