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RUMINATION AND SELF-DESTRUCTIVE BEHAVIORS IN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS: A CORRELATIONAL STUDY IN A LATIN AMERICAN CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT

Rumination is a maladaptive cognitive process associated with emotional distress and risk behaviors among young adults. University students, particularly those exposed to academic and psychosocial stressors, may be especially vulnerable to engaging in self-destructive behaviors as a dysfunctional coping strategy. This study aimed to examine the relationship between rumination and self-destructive behaviors in undergraduate students from a private university in southern Peru. Methods: A quantitative, non-experimental, cross-sectional correlational design was employed. The sample consisted of 303 university students enrolled in a Commercial Engineering program. Rumination was assessed using the Ruminative Response Scale, and self-destructive behaviors were measured with the Self-Destructive Behavior Scale. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and Spearman's rho correlation coefficient due to non-normal data distribution. Results: The findings revealed a statistically significant positive relationship between rumination and overall self-destructive behaviors ($p < .001$). Significant positive associations were also found between rumination and the dimensions of lack of planning, neglect of duties, and risk-seeking behaviors ($p < .001$). However, no significant relationship was observed between rumination and low health maintenance ($p > .05$). Conclusions: Rumination appears to function as a relevant cognitive risk factor associated with indirect self-destructive behaviors in university students. These findings highlight the importance of developing preventive interventions focused on cognitive and emotional regulation to reduce maladaptive behavioral patterns and promote mental health in higher education contexts.

KEYWORDS: Rumination; Self-Destructive Behaviors; University Students; Risk Behaviors; Mental Health.

1. INTRODUCTION

University life represents a critical developmental stage characterized by increased academic demands, social challenges, and significant personal transitions. During this period, students are required to adapt to new responsibilities, manage stress effectively, and make autonomous decisions that may impact their long-term well-being. However, not all students possess adequate coping resources, which may lead to the emergence of maladaptive cognitive and behavioral patterns (Velásquez *et al.*, 2020).

One cognitive process that has received growing attention in psychological research is rumination. Rumination refers to a repetitive and passive focus on negative emotions, personal distress, and the possible causes and consequences of adverse experiences (Nolen-Hoeksema, 1991; Nolen-Hoeksema, 2003). Rather than facilitating problem solving, ruminative thinking tends to intensify emotional discomfort and has been consistently associated with anxiety, depression, and emotional dysregulation (Joormann *et al.*, 2006; Flórez *et al.*, 2018).

In parallel, self-destructive behaviors constitute a broad range of actions that directly or indirectly threaten an individual's physical or psychological integrity. These behaviors include both direct forms, such as self-harm and suicidal ideation, and indirect forms, such as substance abuse, neglect of responsibilities, poor health maintenance, and engagement in risky activities (Kelley *et al.*, 1985; Zavala, 2019). Among university students, indirect self-destructive behaviors are particularly prevalent, as they are often normalized within academic and social environments and may go unnoticed until serious consequences emerge (Schwartz *et al.*, 2011).

Previous research suggests that rumination may play a central role in the development and maintenance of self-destructive behaviors. According to the emotional cascade model, ruminative thinking amplifies negative affect, which in turn increases the likelihood of engaging in maladaptive behaviors as a means of emotional regulation (Selby & Joiner, 2009; Cho *et al.*, 2020). Empirical studies conducted in university populations have found significant associations between rumination, emotional dysregulation, suicidal ideation, and self-injurious behaviors (Velásquez *et al.*, 2020; Jones *et al.*, 2024).

Despite this growing body of evidence, research examining the relationship between rumination and indirect self-destructive behaviors in Latin American university contexts remains limited. Most existing

studies have focused on clinical populations or on extreme outcomes such as suicide attempts, neglecting more subtle but highly prevalent behavioral patterns that compromise students' quality of life.

Therefore, the present study aims to analyze the relationship between rumination and self-destructive behaviors in a sample of university students from Peru. Understanding this relationship may contribute to the identification of psychological risk factors and provide empirical evidence to support the development of preventive mental health strategies within higher education institutions.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Rumination As a Maladaptive Cognitive Process

Rumination has been conceptualized as a repetitive and passive cognitive style characterized by persistent focus on negative emotional states and their underlying causes and consequences (Nolen-Hoeksema, 1991; Nolen-Hoeksema, 2003). Unlike adaptive reflective thinking, rumination does not promote effective problem solving but instead prolongs psychological distress and interferes with goal-directed behavior (Treyner *et al.*, 2003).

The Response Styles Theory proposed by Nolen-Hoeksema (1991) suggests that individuals who habitually ruminate in response to negative mood states are more likely to experience prolonged depressive symptoms and emotional dysregulation. Empirical evidence supports this model, demonstrating that rumination predicts the onset, severity, and duration of depressive and anxiety disorders across different age groups (Joormann *et al.*, 2006; Flórez *et al.*, 2018).

Subsequent research has differentiated rumination into two primary components: reflective rumination and brooding rumination. Reflective rumination involves deliberate cognitive processing aimed at understanding emotional experiences, whereas brooding rumination is characterized by self-critical and judgmental thoughts focused on perceived personal failures (Treyner *et al.*, 2003; Nolen-Hoeksema *et al.*, 2008). Studies indicate that brooding rumination is more strongly associated with psychopathological outcomes, including depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation (Papageorgiou & Wells, 2003; Capobianco *et al.*, 2018).

Among university students, rumination has been linked to academic stress, poor concentration, emotional exhaustion, and diminished academic

performance (Chirio, 2020; Valenzuela et al., 2024). The transition to higher education often exposes students to novel stressors, such as increased academic demands and reduced social support, which may exacerbate ruminative tendencies and hinder adaptive coping mechanisms.

2.2. Self-Destructive Behaviors in University Populations

Self-destructive behaviors refer to actions that increase the likelihood of physical, emotional, or psychological harm to oneself while reducing the probability of positive outcomes (Kelley et al., 1985). These behaviors may manifest in direct forms, such as self-injury and suicidal behavior, or indirect forms, including neglect of responsibilities, poor health maintenance, substance abuse, and engagement in risky activities (Ponce, 2007; Zavala, 2019).

Indirect self-destructive behaviors are particularly prevalent in university populations, as they are often socially normalized and may be perceived as temporary coping strategies rather than harmful behaviors (Schwartz et al., 2011). Research conducted with university students has documented high rates of alcohol consumption, sleep deprivation, inadequate nutrition, and academic neglect, all of which have been associated with poorer mental health outcomes (World Health Organization [WHO], 2023).

Theoretical models suggest that self-destructive behaviors may serve as maladaptive emotion regulation strategies. According to Baumeister and Scher (1988), individuals may engage in self-defeating behaviors as a means of escaping self-awareness or alleviating psychological distress. Similarly, behavioral perspectives propose that such behaviors are negatively reinforced by short-term emotional relief, despite their long-term detrimental consequences (Kelley et al., 1985).

Empirical studies support these theoretical assumptions. Sabet and Kafie (2021) found that self-harm behaviors were relatively common among university students and were frequently associated with emotional distress and poor coping skills. Likewise, Jones et al. (2024) reported that experiences of academic incivility and bullying increased the likelihood of self-destructive behaviors and suicidal ideation in higher education contexts.

2.3. Relationship Between Rumination and Self-Destructive Behaviors

The relationship between rumination and self-destructive behaviors has been increasingly examined within cognitive and emotional regulation

frameworks. The emotional cascade model posits that rumination intensifies negative affect, which in turn increases impulsive and self-destructive behaviors as a means of emotional relief (Selby & Joiner, 2009). This model has been empirically supported in studies involving both clinical and non-clinical populations (Cho et al., 2020).

Research indicates that individuals with high levels of rumination are more likely to engage in behaviors such as substance abuse, self-neglect, and risky activities, particularly under conditions of stress and emotional dysregulation (Otazu, 2014; Berrospi & Ricaldi, 2023). In university samples, rumination has been associated with suicidal ideation, self-injury, and maladaptive coping strategies (Velásquez et al., 2020).

Despite these findings, most studies have focused on direct self-destructive behaviors or clinical outcomes, leaving a gap in the literature regarding indirect self-destructive behaviors and their cognitive antecedents. Furthermore, limited research has explored this relationship in Latin American university contexts, where sociocultural and academic stressors may uniquely influence students' cognitive and behavioral patterns.

2.3. Research Gap and Study Rationale

Although previous research provides substantial evidence linking rumination to psychological distress and self-destructive behaviors, there remains a lack of empirical studies examining this relationship in relation to indirect self-destructive behaviors among university students in developing countries. In Peru, existing studies have primarily addressed adolescent populations or focused on isolated psychological variables, limiting the generalizability of findings to university settings.

Therefore, the present study seeks to address this gap by examining the relationship between rumination and self-destructive behaviors, including their specific dimensions, in a sample of Peruvian university students. By doing so, this research contributes to the existing literature by expanding the understanding of cognitive risk factors associated with maladaptive behavioral patterns and by providing evidence to inform preventive mental health interventions within higher education institutions.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Design

The present study adopted a quantitative approach with a non-experimental, cross-sectional, and correlational design. This methodological

framework was selected to examine the relationship between rumination and self-destructive behaviors without manipulating the study variables, allowing for the analysis of naturally occurring psychological patterns within a university population (Hernández et al., 2014).

3.2. Participants

The population consisted of undergraduate students enrolled in the Commercial Engineering program at a private university located in southern Peru. A census sampling method was employed, resulting in a final sample of 303 students from the first to the tenth academic cycle. Both male and female students were included, reflecting the gender distribution of the academic program.

Inclusion criteria were: (a) being officially enrolled during the 2024 academic year, (b) voluntary participation, and (c) providing informed consent. Students who did not complete the questionnaires in full were excluded from the analysis.

3.3. Instruments

3.3.1. Rumination

Rumination was assessed using the **Ruminative Response Scale (RRS)** developed by Nolen-Hoeksema (2003). This instrument measures the tendency to engage in repetitive and passive thinking in response to negative emotional states. The scale consists of items that evaluate two dimensions: reflective rumination and brooding rumination (Nolen-Hoeksema et al., 2008).

Previous studies have reported adequate psychometric properties for the RRS in university populations, demonstrating satisfactory internal consistency and construct validity (Treyner et al., 2003; Hernández et al., 2016). In the present study, the scale showed acceptable reliability, consistent with prior research.

3.3.2. Self-Destructive Behaviors

Self-destructive behaviors were measured using the **Self-Destructive Behavior Scale** proposed by Kelley et al. (1985). This instrument assesses indirect self-destructive behaviors across four dimensions: lack of planning, neglect of duties, risk-seeking behaviors, and low health maintenance.

The scale has been widely used in research with adolescent and university populations and has demonstrated adequate reliability and validity in different cultural contexts (Cano, 2020; Zavala, 2019). Its multidimensional structure allows for a comprehensive assessment of behavioral patterns

that may compromise psychological and physical well-being.

3.3.3. Procedure

Data collection was conducted during the academic year 2024. Authorization was obtained from the university authorities prior to the administration of the instruments. Participants were informed about the objectives of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, and the confidentiality of their responses.

The questionnaires were administered collectively in classroom settings under standardized conditions. Participants completed the instruments anonymously, and no identifying information was collected. The administration process took approximately 20 minutes per group.

3.3.4. Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to ethical principles for research involving human participants, in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and confidentiality and anonymity were guaranteed throughout the research process. Participation was entirely voluntary, and students were free to withdraw from the study at any time without academic consequences.

3.3.5. Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using statistical software. Descriptive statistics were computed to determine the levels of rumination and self-destructive behaviors. Prior to inferential analysis, normality was assessed using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test.

Given that the data did not meet normality assumptions, Spearman's rho correlation coefficient was employed to examine the relationships between rumination and self-destructive behaviors, as well as between rumination and each of the behavioral dimensions. Statistical significance was established at a p-value of $< .05$.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Descriptive Analysis

Descriptive statistics were calculated to determine the levels of rumination and self-destructive behaviors among the university students. The analysis revealed that rumination was predominantly present at a moderate level within the sample. A considerable proportion of students reported frequent engagement in repetitive negative thinking, particularly related to emotional discomfort and academic stress.

Regarding self-destructive behaviors, the results indicated a moderate overall level among participants. Indirect self-destructive behaviors were more prevalent than direct manifestations, with notable frequencies observed in behaviors associated with lack of planning and neglect of duties. These findings suggest that maladaptive behavioral patterns are relatively common within the university context but often remain subtle and normalized.

4.2. Normality Testing

Prior to conducting correlational analyses, the distribution of the study variables was examined using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test. The results indicated that both rumination and self-destructive behaviors deviated from a normal distribution ($p < .05$). Consequently, non-parametric statistical techniques were selected for inferential analysis.

4.3. Correlation Between Rumination and Self-Destructive Behaviors

Spearman's rho correlation analysis revealed a statistically significant positive relationship between rumination and overall self-destructive behaviors ($\rho > 0$, $p < .001$). This finding indicates that higher levels of ruminative thinking are associated with a greater presence of self-destructive behavioral patterns among university students.

4.4. Correlation Between Rumination and Dimensions of Self-Destructive Behaviors

Further analyses examined the relationship between rumination and each dimension of self-destructive behaviors:

- **Lack of planning:** A significant positive correlation was observed between rumination and lack of planning ($p < .001$), suggesting that students with higher ruminative tendencies tend to exhibit greater difficulties in organizing their time, setting goals, and engaging in purposeful behavior.
- **Neglect of duties:** Rumination was also significantly associated with neglect of duties ($p < .001$). This result indicates that repetitive negative thinking may interfere with students' ability to fulfill academic and personal responsibilities effectively.
- **Risk-seeking behaviors:** A statistically significant positive relationship was found between rumination and risk-seeking behaviors ($p < .001$). Students who reported higher levels of rumination were more likely to engage in behaviors involving substance use, impulsivity, or exposure to potentially harmful

situations.

- **Low health maintenance:** In contrast, no statistically significant relationship was identified between rumination and low health maintenance ($p > .05$). This suggests that while ruminative thinking is related to several indirect self-destructive behaviors, it may not directly influence health-related behaviors such as medical adherence or preventive care within this population.

4.5. Summary Of Findings

Overall, the results demonstrate that rumination is a significant cognitive correlate of indirect self-destructive behaviors among university students. The strongest associations were observed with behavioral dimensions related to planning, responsibility, and risk-taking, whereas health maintenance behaviors appeared to be influenced by other factors beyond ruminative thinking.

5. DISCUSSION

The objective of the present study was to examine the relationship between rumination and self-destructive behaviors in a sample of university students from a private institution in Peru. The findings provide empirical support for the existence of a significant association between ruminative thinking and indirect self-destructive behaviors, contributing to the growing body of literature that highlights rumination as a relevant cognitive risk factor in young adult populations.

The results demonstrated a statistically significant positive relationship between rumination and overall self-destructive behaviors. This finding is consistent with previous studies indicating that repetitive negative thinking intensifies emotional distress and increases vulnerability to maladaptive coping strategies (Nolen-Hoeksema, 2003; Flórez et al., 2018). From a cognitive-emotional perspective, rumination appears to function as a mechanism that prolongs negative affect, thereby increasing the likelihood of engaging in behaviors aimed at temporarily alleviating psychological discomfort.

In line with the emotional cascade model proposed by Selby and Joiner (2009), students with higher levels of rumination may experience amplified emotional responses that exceed their regulatory capacity, leading them to adopt indirect self-destructive behaviors such as academic neglect, poor planning, or risk-taking. This model provides a useful theoretical framework for understanding how cognitive processes translate into behavioral outcomes within non-clinical university populations.

Regarding the specific dimensions of self-destructive behaviors, significant associations were found between rumination and lack of planning, neglect of duties, and risk-seeking behaviors. These results align with findings reported by Zavala (2019) and Cano (2020), who observed that indirect self-destructive behaviors often manifest through disorganization, irresponsibility, and engagement in risky activities. Rumination may impair executive functioning by consuming cognitive resources, thereby reducing students' ability to plan effectively, prioritize tasks, and maintain consistent goal-directed behavior (Joormann et al., 2006).

The significant relationship between rumination and neglect of duties suggests that repetitive negative thinking may interfere with academic engagement and responsibility. Students who are cognitively absorbed in ruminative processes may struggle to meet academic demands, leading to procrastination, absenteeism, and reduced academic performance. This finding supports previous research indicating that rumination is negatively associated with concentration, motivation, and academic functioning (Chirio, 2020; Valenzuela et al., 2024).

Similarly, the positive association between rumination and risk-seeking behaviors is consistent with studies highlighting the link between emotional dysregulation and impulsive or hazardous actions (Otazu, 2014; Berrospi & Ricaldi, 2023). In this context, risk behaviors may serve as maladaptive emotion regulation strategies that provide short-term relief from psychological distress but increase long-term vulnerability.

In contrast, no significant relationship was found between rumination and low health maintenance. This finding differs from some prior research suggesting that cognitive distress is associated with poor health behaviors (WHO, 2023). One possible explanation is that health maintenance behaviors may be influenced more strongly by external factors such as access to healthcare, socioeconomic conditions, or cultural health beliefs, rather than by cognitive processes alone. Additionally, indirect health-related behaviors may be less salient or consciously perceived by university students, reducing their association with ruminative thinking.

Overall, the findings reinforce the conceptualization of rumination as a maladaptive cognitive style that contributes to indirect forms of self-destructive behavior rather than solely to extreme outcomes such as self-harm or suicidal ideation. By focusing on subtle yet prevalent behaviors, this study expands the understanding of

how cognitive vulnerabilities manifest in everyday university life, particularly in Latin American contexts where such phenomena remain underexplored.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The present study examined the relationship between rumination and self-destructive behaviors in a sample of university students from a private institution in southern Peru. The findings confirm that rumination is significantly associated with indirect self-destructive behaviors, highlighting its relevance as a cognitive vulnerability factor in university populations.

Specifically, higher levels of rumination were positively related to greater difficulties in planning, increased neglect of academic and personal responsibilities, and a higher tendency to engage in risk-seeking behaviors. These results suggest that ruminative thinking may impair students' capacity to regulate emotions and behaviors effectively, increasing their susceptibility to maladaptive coping strategies in response to stress.

Conversely, no significant relationship was found between rumination and low health maintenance. This finding indicates that health-related behaviors may be influenced by variables other than cognitive rumination, such as environmental, cultural, or socioeconomic factors. Consequently, rumination appears to be more closely linked to behavioral and academic self-regulation than to health maintenance practices within this population.

From a theoretical perspective, the results support the Response Styles Theory (Nolen-Hoeksema, 1991) and the emotional cascade model (Selby & Joiner, 2009), reinforcing the notion that rumination intensifies emotional distress and contributes to maladaptive behavioral outcomes. Practically, the study underscores the importance of incorporating cognitive and emotional regulation strategies into university mental health programs, with an emphasis on reducing ruminative thinking and promoting adaptive coping mechanisms.

7. LIMITATIONS

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the cross-sectional design does not allow for causal inferences between rumination and self-destructive behaviors. Longitudinal studies are needed to examine the directionality and temporal stability of these relationships.

Second, data were collected through self-report instruments, which may be subject to response biases

such as social desirability or inaccurate self-perception. Future research could incorporate qualitative methods or multi-informant assessments to enhance data validity.

Third, the sample was drawn from a single academic program at one private university, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other university populations or cultural contexts. Replication studies involving diverse institutions and disciplines are recommended.

8. FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Future research should explore the potential mediating and moderating variables that may

influence the relationship between rumination and self-destructive behaviors, such as emotional regulation strategies, resilience, social support, and academic stress. Additionally, longitudinal and experimental designs would allow for a deeper understanding of causal mechanisms and the effectiveness of targeted interventions.

Further studies could also examine the role of cultural and contextual factors in shaping ruminative processes and behavioral outcomes in Latin American university students. Such research would contribute to the development of culturally sensitive prevention and intervention programs aimed at improving students' mental health and academic well-being.

Compliance with Ethical Standards: All procedures followed were in accordance with the ethical standards of the responsible committee on human experimentation (institutional and national) and with the Helsinki Declaration of 1975, as revised in 2000. Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

The authors did not perform studies with animals or humans for this article.

Data Availability: The datasets generated and/or analyzed during the current study are not publicly available due to confidentiality and anonymity agreements with participants but are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Ethical Approval: This study was conducted in accordance with ethical standards for research involving human participants and followed the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki. The research protocol was reviewed and approved by the institutional authorities of the participating university.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of Interest: The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

Informed Consent: Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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