

A Systematic Review of Psychological Capital and Its Relationship with Mental Health among Undergraduate University Students

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Abstract

Psychological capital (PsyCap) is a concept from organizational psychology that refers to the development of positive psychological states that motivate behavior. It comprising hope, self-efficacy, resilience, and optimism play a crucial role in enhancing well-being. The purpose of this review is to explore the relationship between PsyCap and mental health among undergraduate university students. A systematic review was conducted on the recent scientific production (i.e., published papers over the last 12 years) in Google Scholar, PubMed, Scopus, PsycINFO, and ScienceDirect. For this, it was used the following search terms: “psychological capital,” “mental health,” “hope,” “optimism,” “resilience,” “self-efficacy,” and “students” in the title, abstract, or keywords, all entered in a single search and connected by the Boolean operator “AND.” This study identified 219 articles in the scientific literature, but only 13 articles were classified as eligible according to the previously established criteria, highlighting the lack of studies that address the theme under investigation. The findings indicate that higher PsyCap levels are strongly associated with improved mental health outcomes, suggesting that interventions aimed at enhancing PsyCap may significantly benefit students’ mental well-being and overall life satisfaction.

Keywords: Hope, mental health, optimism, psychological capital, resilience, self-efficacy, students

INTRODUCTION

Psychological distress stands out as the most common mental health challenge faced by university students.^[1] The prevalence of mental health problems among university students has exponentially increased during the last 15 years.^[2] Compared to the general population, university students, on average, have increased mental health problems such as depression, anxiety, suicidal thoughts, psychosis, addictions, the risk for suicide, use of psychiatric medications, and other chronic psychiatric disorders.^[3] Students face several stressors that may contribute to problems ranging from decreased concentration, fatigue, and anxiety to eating disorders and other physical and psychological issues.^[4] They are more prone to stress, and there is a clear relationship between stress and mental illness among students.^[5]

Students encounter various mental health challenges and crises, some of which significantly disrupt their daily functioning, while others experience minimal or no such impact.^[6] In

today’s world, being a student is the most challenging task, and the academic system has become more demanding than ever.^[7] It is becoming more complex as competition increases, resulting in a high level of stress among university students.^[8] It is critical to identify these stressors for the early prevention and promotion of mental health in these populations. Students with more stress-resilient personalities suffer less health squalor in response to the same exposure.^[9] These people exhibit “positive” traits and skills (such as optimism, positive emotionality, toughness, hope, ego, and resilience) that are inversely correlated with physical and mental

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Submitted: 02-Jan-2025

Revised: 18-Mar-2025

Accepted: 29-Mar-2025

Published: 27-Apr-2026

Access this article online

Quick Response Code:



Website:
<https://journals.lww.com/armh>

DOI:
10.4103/amhs.amhs_1_25

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How to cite this article: Paul FA, Banerjee I, Ali A, Saikia P, Ganie AU, Gulzar S. A systematic review of psychological capital and its relationship with mental health among undergraduate university students. Arch Med Health Sci 0;0:0.

health symptoms.^[10] Various dimensions of psychological capital (PsyCap) have begun to appear in the health literature, but the four dimensions were first proposed by Luthans.^[11]

The conceptual description of PsyCap in health studies does not always contain optimism, self-efficacy, resilience, or hope. This may be influenced by the claim that the four dimensions of PsyCap are not unchangeable.^[12] There is a need to explore if hope, self-efficacy, resilience, and optimism most frequently predict and describe the state-like characteristics that promote positive outcomes for a student or youth's "possible self" in health research.^[13] PsyCap is one possible way to focus on and understand more fully an individual's state-like positive attributes.^[14] Higher levels of PsyCap are associated with improved subjective well-being and life satisfaction within the business literature across international borders.^[15] Based on the various pieces of literature, undergraduate students with higher levels of PsyCap are less likely to have mental health problems.^[16] To the best of the researcher's knowledge, no prior review has specifically examined the relationship between PsyCap and mental health among undergraduate students. The primary aim of this systematic review is to explore the relationship between PsyCap and mental health among undergraduate students.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Search strategy

A comprehensive literature search was conducted across multiple databases, including Google Scholar, PubMed, Scopus, PsycINFO, and ScienceDirect to identify relevant studies. The search was limited to studies published between March 2010 and October 2022 to capture the most recent and relevant data. The following keywords were used: "psychological capital," "mental health," "hope," "optimism," "resilience," "self-efficacy," and "students." Boolean operators (AND, OR) were employed to refine the search results.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Studies were included if they met the following criteria

The present study meticulously adhered to the following inclusion criteria: (1) the researcher followed the article published between 2010 and 2022, (2) it has been published in English, (3) quantitative studies, descriptive studies, and observational study design (prospective or retrospective cohort and experimental study), and (4) sample population was college and university students.

Studies were excluded if they

The following exclusion criteria have been adopted in this study: (1) unrelated research works, (2) studies without sufficient data, (3) duplicate sources; (4) pieces of research with unclear methodologies, (5) case reports, and (6) articles whose full text was not accessible. Existing systematic and literature reviews were excluded from this study to ensure the

inclusion of primary research only. However, their reference lists were screened to identify relevant primary studies that met the inclusion criteria.

Study selection process

The study selection process followed the preferred reporting items for systematic reviews and Meta-analyses (PRISMA) guidelines.^[17] After removing duplicates, two independent reviewers screened titles and abstracts for relevance. Full-text articles were then assessed against the inclusion and exclusion criteria. Discrepancies were resolved through discussion or by consulting a third reviewer.

Data extraction process

Data were extracted from each included study using a standardized form. Two independent reviewers extracted data from the included studies. Any discrepancies were resolved through discussion or by consulting a third reviewer. Following the PRISMA guidelines, we made a flow diagram [Figure 1] to show our results. Clarifications and doubts were sorted out by mutual discussion with other coauthors.

Quality assessment

These studies were evaluated in a systematic manner based on six criteria. Scores against each of the quality criteria were rated on a scale from 1 to 5, where scores are taken as lowest = 1 and highest = 5, used for total score to provide an overall quality rating for each study included in this review.

Criteria for quality assessment

1. Clear definition of the study population (1–5)
 - 1: Vague or unclear population definition
 - 3: Somewhat clear, with minor ambiguities
 - 5: Well-defined population with clear inclusion and exclusion criteria.
2. Appropriateness of the study design and methods (1–5)
 - 1: Inappropriate or poorly chosen study design/methods
 - 3: Adequate design/methods with some limitations
 - 5: Highly appropriate and well-justified design/methods.
3. Adequacy of the sample size (1–5)
 - 1: Insufficient sample size to draw meaningful conclusions
 - 3: Moderate sample size with some limitations in power
 - 5: Large and adequate sample size providing robust results.
4. Validity and reliability of the measurement tools (1–5)
 - 1: Use of nonvalidated or unreliable tools
 - 3: Mixed validity and reliability of tools
 - 5: Use of well-validated and reliable tools.
5. Control for potential confounding factors (1–5)
 - 1: No control for confounding factors
 - 3: Partial control with some confounders unaddressed
 - 5: Comprehensive control for all relevant confounding factors.

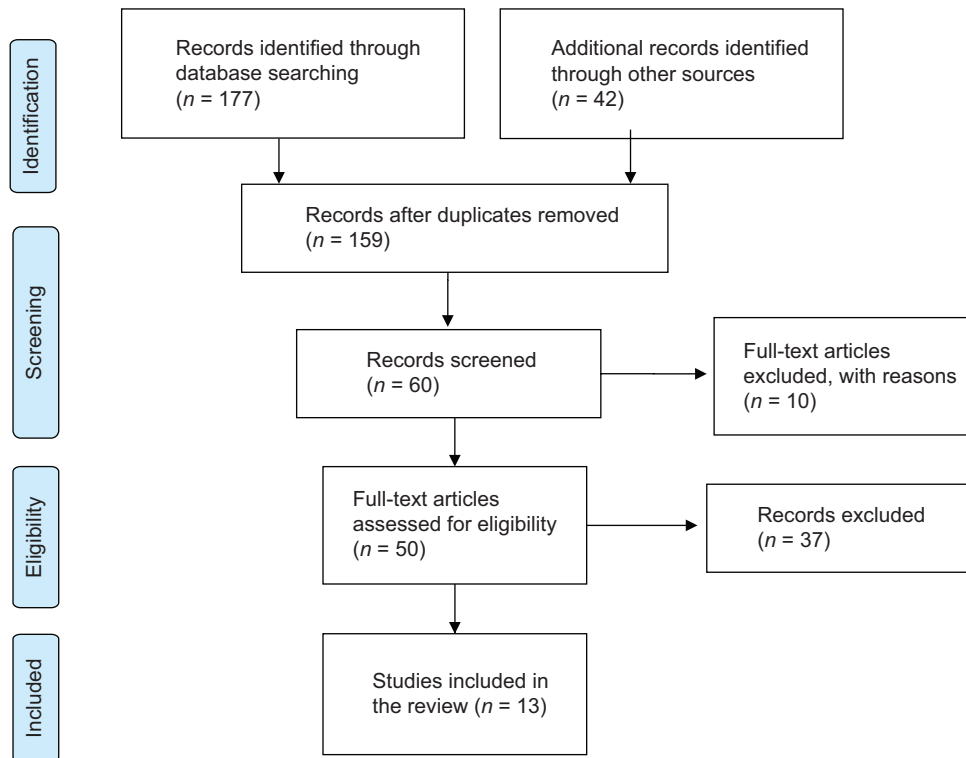


Figure 1: Flow chart of data extraction based on preferred reporting items for systematic reviews and meta-analyses guidelines

6. Transparency in reporting results and conclusions (1–5).
- 1: Poor reporting with lack of clarity
 - 3: Adequate reporting with some gaps
 - 5: Clear and transparent reporting of all results and conclusions.

Rating and categorization

Each study scores across the six criteria were summed to calculate a total quality score. The studies were then categorized based on their total score:

- High Quality: 25–30
- Moderate Quality: 18–24
- Low Quality: Below 18.

Quality assessment process

To ensure the reliability of data extraction, two independent reviewers screened the studies and extracted the data. Any discrepancies were resolved through discussion, and a third reviewer was consulted when necessary.

DISCUSSION

The findings from this systematic review highlight the pervasive role of PsyCap in influencing mental health outcomes among students across diverse cultural and demographic contexts. PsyCap, encompassing the core components of hope, self-efficacy, resilience, and optimism (collectively referred to as hope efficacy resilience and optimism [HERO]), emerges as a vital protective factor that enhances mental well-being, and buffers against

depression, anxiety, and stress. This systematic review thoroughly summarizes the literature assessing PsyCap and its relationship with mental health among undergraduate university students. Although the PsyCap construct originated in organizational psychology, it is encouraging to find that all 13 independent studies took place in various academic settings. Notably, the studies encompassed a diverse range of cultural contexts, with research conducted across various countries, including the USA, China, Pakistan, Romania, Iran, Canada, and India. This global representation underscores the widespread relevance of PsyCap in influencing mental health across different cultural and educational settings.

The majority of the studies that explored PsyCap about mental health outcomes among students demonstrated a significant positive relationship with positive mental health outcomes and a significant negative relationship with negative mental health outcomes.^[18,26] PsyCap has established a stronger relationship with psychological well-being. Students were likely to experience higher psychological resources, which positively impacted their academic performance.^[25] PsyCap was found to have a positive correlation with the students' mental well-being. Various research studies show that positive psychological strengths such as hope, efficacy, resilience, and optimism within college students significantly increase their positive mental health.^[18,27] PsyCap among young adults leads to better mental health because it is negatively associated with externalizing behavior problems. Stress and indices of mental and physical well-being modulate PsyCap. PsyCap buffered the impact of stress, reducing the relationship between stress and negative outcomes.^[20,23]

It was found that the resilience and optimism components of PsyCap fully mediated the social comparison orientation-mental health relationship among undergraduate university students.^[22] PsyCap has an inverse relationship with social support, anxiety, and depression. While social support is generally perceived as a positive influence on psychological well-being, the results suggest that higher levels of PsyCap may be associated with lower reliance on social support. This could be attributed to individuals with higher PsyCap possessing greater self-efficacy, resilience, and optimism, leading them to rely more on internal resources rather than external support networks. Further research is needed to explore the contextual factors influencing this relationship, such as cultural differences, workplace environments, and individual coping mechanisms. PsyCap was positively associated with self-compassion and negatively associated with depression. Selvaraj found a positive linear relationship between PsyCap and mental health. It suggests that developing positive psychological strengths such as hope, efficacy, resilience, and optimism among college students could increase their positive mental health.^[21] In the context of student health, there is a pressing need for further exploration into strategies that enhance PsyCap within university settings. This review also highlights PsyCap's potential as a vital resource for adolescents, enabling them to bolster subjective well-being and mitigate depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation, even when faced with adverse environments and traumatic experiences.^[25]

As mental health concerns continue to rise among university students, identifying factors that promote psychological well-being has become increasingly critical. PsyCap, a positive psychological resource encompassing hope, efficacy, resilience, and optimism, has garnered significant attention for its potential to enhance mental health outcomes. This review delves into the role of PsyCap as a predictive construct, highlighting its ability to foster resilience, mitigate stress, and enhance overall well-being in diverse student populations.

Psychological capital as a predictor of mental health

A central theme across all reviewed studies is PsyCap's strong predictive power in enhancing mental health. Studies such as those by Selvaraj and Bhat and Ghaedi consistently demonstrate that higher levels of PsyCap are positively correlated with improved mental health outcomes. These findings suggest that PsyCap is not merely a passive psychological trait but an active, dynamic construct that can predict variations in mental health, reinforcing its relevance in promoting student well-being. The characteristics of the included studies, including authors, year of publication, study design, sample size, and key findings, are summarized in Table 1.^[18,29]

Hope efficacy resilience and optimism components and their impact

Several studies dissected the specific contributions of the HERO components. Yang *et al.* provided compelling evidence that resilience and optimism act as mediators between social comparison and mental health. Similarly, Selvaraj and Bhat

showed that all four components hope, efficacy, resilience, and optimism collectively enhance positive mental health. These results indicate that while each component contributes uniquely, resilience, and optimism appear particularly potent in reducing the adverse effects of environmental stressors and social pressures.^[18,22]

Cultural and gender differences in psychological capital's efficacy

Cultural diversity across the reviewed studies, spanning the USA, India, Pakistan, China, Iran, and Romania, underscores the universality of PsyCap while also revealing nuanced differences. For instance, Younas *et al.* highlighted gender-specific responses to PsyCap, suggesting that male and female students may benefit differently from PsyCap interventions. Furthermore, cultural contexts, as seen in studies by Nafees and Jahan, Turliuc and Candel, shape how PsyCap interacts with mental health, pointing to the necessity of culturally tailored PsyCap development programs.^[19,20,27]

Stress buffering and resilience enhancement

The review underscores PsyCap's efficacy in buffering against stress and negative mental health outcomes. Studies such as Riolli *et al.*, Kaur and Sandhu revealed that PsyCap significantly mitigates the impact of academic stress, reducing its association with negative emotional outcomes. This aligns with resilience theories that suggest PsyCap fortifies individuals against stress by promoting adaptive coping mechanisms, thereby enhancing students' capacity to thrive under pressure.^[23,26]

Trainability and practical applications of psychological capital

One of the most promising insights from this review is the evidence that PsyCap is trainable. Bakker *et al.*, emphasized that PsyCap components can be cultivated through structured interventions, offering practical implications for mental health programs in educational institutions.^[28] These findings open avenues for developing PsyCap-focused curricula that target student well-being, potentially reducing the prevalence of anxiety and depressive symptoms in academic settings.

This systematic review adds evidence to the existing body of knowledge about PsyCap and its relationship with mental health among undergraduate university students. Universities and colleges must lay the groundwork for awareness campaigns about mental health and direct students to mental health programs during this critical period of a student's life. Additional longitudinal studies need to be conducted to critically investigate the source of mental distress and its associated factors among university students.

Strengths and limitations

The findings of this review need to be considered because of some strengths and limitations. The strengths include being the first review of this kind to determine mental health and its relationship with PsyCap among undergraduate university

Table 1: Summarized characteristics of included studies

Author, year and country	Aim of the study	Sample (n)	Study design	Findings of the study
Selvaraj and Bhat, 2018 USA ^[18]	Explored the relationship of PsyCap and mental health among university students	338	Cross-sectional	PsyCap demonstrated a moderate to strong correlation with mental health among university students
Nafees and Jahan, 2017 India ^[19]	Examine the influence of PsyCap on the mental health of students	80	Cross-sectional	PsyCap was found to have a positive and significant correlation with student's mental health
Younas <i>et al.</i> , 2020 Pakistan ^[20]	Explore the differences across gender on PsyCap and mental health	200	Cross-sectional	PsyCap among young adults leads to better mental health as it is negatively associated with internalizing and externalizing behavior problems
Selvaraj, 2015 USA ^[21]	To evaluate the relationship between PsyCap and mental health and to determine the extent of variability in mental health using PsyCap HERO dimensions as predictors	338	Cross-sectional	Positive linear relationship between PsyCap and mental health was found
Yang <i>et al.</i> , 2021 China ^[22]	To examine the mediating affect of the four PsyCap components of hope, self-efficacy, resilience, and optimism in relationship between social comparison orientation and mental health	304	Cross-sectional	Resilience and optimism components of PsyCap fully mediated the social comparison orientation mental health relationship
Riulli <i>et al.</i> , 2012 USA ^[23]	To examine the influence of PsyCap on the well-being of university undergraduates	141	Cross-sectional	PsyCap buffered the impact of stress so that the relationship between stress and negative outcomes was reduced
Preston and Rew, 2022 USA ^[24]	To explore how PsyCap is described in youth mental health literature and how PsyCap and mental health are related	772	Cross-sectional	PsyCap has a positive relationship with mental health in youth
Gautam <i>et al.</i> , 2019, India ^[25]	To investigate the impact of PsyCap on the well-being of students	109	Cross-sectional	Findings confirmed the positive significant impact of PsyCap on the well-being of students
Kaur and Sandhu, 2016 India ^[26]	Explore PsyCap among university students and its relation to stress	200	Exploratory study	The results show that negative relationship between PsyCap and stress among university students
Selvaraj and Bhat, 2018 USA ^[18]	To examine relationships and predictions that exists between levels of mental health in college students	338	Exploratory study	Hope, efficacy, resilience, and optimism within college students significantly increased their positive mental health
Turluc and Candel, 2022 Romania ^[27]	To analyze the relationship between PsyCap measured some indicators of mental health	290	Longitudinal study	PsyCap has a significant positive effect on satisfaction with life and significant negative effects on depression and anxiety
Bakker <i>et al.</i> , 2017 Canada ^[28]	To examine the impact of PsyCap on depressive symptoms among students	84	Exploratory	PsyCap components are trainable, offering practical ways to enhance student wellness for students, faculty, and health professionals
Ghaedi, 2018 Iran ^[29]	To predict mental health of psychology students of Tehran University based on PsyCap	1398	Correlational	PsyCap significantly correlated with mental health. Increasing student's psychological capital can lead to improved mental well-being

PsyCap: Psychological capital, HERO: Hope efficacy resilience and optimism

students in India. While our study provides valuable insights, certain limitations should be acknowledged. Comparative and experimental studies will be required to further validate our findings and establish causality. In addition, language restrictions limited our ability to include studies published in other languages, which may have introduced a bias in the literature reviewed. This review helps identify areas for future research on the topic of PsyCap, and healthcare providers should use caution in deciding how to incorporate the findings of this review into their practice. A second limitation is that we restricted our search to five databases and limited our results to studies published in English. It is possible that relevant articles were missed. A third limitation is the generalizability of this review's findings. Given the range of attributes characterizing PsyCap across studies and global boundaries, some features

may not be cross-culturally relevant. Although data screening and extraction were conducted by two independent reviewers, with a third reviewer resolving disagreements, the process may still be subject to human error or interpretation bias. Future research should aim to overcome these constraints to enhance generalizability.

Research implications

To enhance our understanding of inner resources, high-risk university students have the potential to develop our understanding of inner resources. Additional studies need to be conducted, and mental health professionals begin this work by surveying the student population and considering positive attributes that may play a role in mental health outcomes. Not all university and college students have equal access to

mental health care, yet most have access to a university-based counselor. Counselors, as holistic care providers, are concerned with more than just students meeting developmental and academic benchmarks; they also seek to enhance student well-being and reduce the impact of social inequities, such as access to health care. The researcher argues no other healthcare professional is in a more prime position in the community to intervene holistically on behalf of student health. PsyCap interventions are well-suited for implementation in the university setting to enhance student success and mental health outcomes. An increased incidence of students being prescribed psychotropic medications calls for university-based counselors to incorporate population-level strategies to facilitate students' vision for their future selves and enhance their inner resources. Furthermore, college and university counselors are uniquely suited to influence the further development of PsyCap and other positive psychology concepts in students' health literature. The emergent nature of PsyCap literature has not addressed the social determinants of mental health among university students and young adults, and further research is needed. PsyCap interventions at the university level may reduce mental and behavioral health disparities among disenfranchised and marginalized populations of society.

CONCLUSION

The systematic review affirms PsyCap's substantial role in enhancing mental health, reducing stress, and promoting overall well-being among students. PsyCap represents a valuable psychological resource that can be nurtured through targeted interventions, providing an empirically supported pathway for fostering resilience, optimism, and mental fortitude in diverse educational settings. These findings have profound implications for educators, mental health professionals, and policymakers seeking to optimize student mental health outcomes.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank the library staff for providing access to e-resources and in helping the team in retrieving the needed articles.

Financial support and sponsorship

Nil.

Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts of interest.

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