

Understanding the Link between Psychological Distress and Well-Being: The Role of Hope among University Students

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Abstract

The present study examined the relationship among psychological distress, hope and psychological wellbeing of university students in Pakistan. A cross-sectional research design was used to examine the relationships among the study variables. The sample consisted of 250 university students. Convenience sampling technique was used for data collection. Kessler Psychological Distress Scale by Kessler et al. (2002), Trait Hope Scale by Snyder et al. (1991) and Psychological wellbeing scale by Ryff and Keyes (1995) were used to collect data. The collected data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). The study was conducted to examine the moderating role of hope between psychological distress and psychological wellbeing. The findings showed a significant negative relationship between psychological distress and psychological wellbeing, indicating that individuals with higher psychological distress tended to report lower levels of psychological wellbeing. Furthermore, self esteem significantly moderated the relationship between psychological distress and psychological wellbeing. The findings suggest that psychological distress is negatively associated with psychological well-being, while hope is positively associated with well-being. The results further show that hope plays a significant moderating role, indicating that higher hope may reduce the negative impact of psychological distress on psychological well-being. These findings highlight the importance of promoting hope among university students to support their psychological well-being.

Keywords: Psychological distress, Hope, Psychological wellbeing

Introduction

University life is an important stage in which students face academic, social, personal, and future-related challenges. They have to manage academic work, examinations, relationships, financial concerns, family expectations, and career decisions, often at the same time. These demands can affect their mental health and may contribute to psychological distress. However, the absence of psychological problems does not always mean that a student has good psychological well-being. A student may experience stress or emotional difficulties while still having meaningful goals, positive relationships, and opportunities for personal growth. Therefore, understanding university students' mental health requires attention to both psychological difficulties and positive psychological functioning. Previous research has also emphasized the importance of considering both psychological symptoms and positive well-being among university students (Baetens et al., 2022; Rasheed et al., 2022).

Psychological distress refers to a state of emotional and psychological discomfort that may include anxiety, depressive feelings, stress, worry, and difficulties in coping with everyday demands. University students may

experience distress when the demands of university life become difficult to manage or when they feel that they do not have enough psychological resources to deal with their problems. Psychological distress is an important concern among university students because it can affect their daily functioning and overall mental health. Research among Pakistani university students has also reported mental health concerns, including anxiety, depression, and stress, highlighting the need to understand factors that influence students' psychological functioning (Bukhari & Ejaz, 2020; Rasheed et al., 2022).

Psychological distress may be closely related to psychological well-being because ongoing emotional difficulties can make positive functioning more difficult. Students who are frequently worried, emotionally overwhelmed, or unable to cope with problems may find it harder to maintain positive relationships, manage their daily environment, develop themselves, and maintain a clear sense of purpose. Research among university students has found that psychological difficulties can be associated with poorer well-being. However, some students may continue to experience positive aspects of well-being even when they face psychological difficulties (Baetens et al., 2022). This suggests that other psychological factors may influence how strongly distress affects psychological well-being.

Psychological well-being represents the positive side of mental health and focuses on how well individuals function in different areas of their lives. Ryff's model describes psychological well-being through six dimensions: self-acceptance, positive relations with others, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life, and personal growth. In simple terms, psychological well-being involves accepting oneself, developing positive relationships, making independent decisions, managing everyday situations, having meaningful goals, and continuing to grow as a person. This approach is especially relevant to university students because good mental health involves more than simply the absence of anxiety or depression. Research has also highlighted the importance of positive psychological functioning in understanding university students' mental health (Ryff, 1989; Rasheed et al., 2022).

Psychological distress and psychological well-being are therefore expected to have a negative relationship. Higher levels of distress may interfere with several areas of positive functioning described by Ryff. For example, students who feel emotionally overwhelmed may have greater difficulty managing their environment, maintaining positive relationships, pursuing meaningful goals, and experiencing personal growth. Research among university students has provided support for the link between psychological difficulties and poorer well-being, although some students may maintain positive functioning despite experiencing psychological problems (Baetens et al., 2022).

One factor that may help explain these differences is hope. Hope is a positive psychological resource that helps individuals think about their goals and their ability to achieve them. According to Snyder's Hope Theory, hope mainly involves two types of thinking: agency and pathways. Agency refers to the motivation and determination to work toward a desired goal, whereas pathways refer to the ability to identify possible ways of reaching that goal. Thus, hope is not simply the expectation that something good will happen. Rather, hopeful individuals are more likely to believe that their goals are achievable and to identify alternative ways of reaching them when difficulties arise (Snyder et al., 1991; Snyder, 2002).

Hope may be positively related to psychological well-being because having meaningful goals, motivation, and possible ways of dealing with problems can support positive psychological functioning. Students with higher levels of hope may be more likely to maintain a sense of purpose, continue working toward important goals, and look for solutions when they face difficulties. Research among college students found that higher hope was associated with increases in positive affect and life satisfaction over time, suggesting that hope may contribute to students' well-being (Rand et al., 2020). Previous research has also identified hope as an important psychological resource associated with better well-being (Murphy, 2023).

The relationship between hope and psychological well-being may become particularly important when students face difficult circumstances. Hope can help students look beyond their current problems and maintain the belief that positive change is possible. Research has suggested that hope can support well-being during

challenging situations by helping individuals remain motivated and identify possible ways to deal with difficulties (Counted et al., 2022; Dizon et al., 2023). Research among university students has also suggested that hope can have a protective role when students experience psychological or situational difficulties (Saleem et al., 2023).

Based on these findings, hope may not only predict psychological well-being but may also change the strength of the relationship between psychological distress and psychological well-being. This is known as moderation. In the present study, psychological distress is expected to have a stronger negative relationship with psychological well-being among students with low levels of hope. In contrast, this negative relationship may be weaker among students with higher levels of hope. This possible buffering role is supported by research showing that hope moderated the negative relationship between intolerance of uncertainty and psychological well-being among university students in Kashmir. The negative relationship was stronger among students with lower levels of hope (Saleem et al., 2023).

Snyder's Hope Theory provides a theoretical explanation for this possible moderating role. When students experience psychological distress, they may feel that their problems are difficult to manage and may struggle to see possible solutions. Students with higher levels of hope may have stronger agency thinking, which can help them maintain motivation, and stronger pathways thinking, which can help them identify alternative ways of dealing with problems. Therefore, hope may not remove psychological distress, but it may reduce the extent to which distress affects positive psychological functioning. Previous research has shown that hope is associated with better adjustment and well-being and may serve as a psychological resource during stressful circumstances (Snyder et al., 1991; Rand et al., 2020).

Ryff's Psychological Well-Being Model provides further support for the proposed model by explaining positive psychological functioning. Psychological distress may interfere with self-acceptance, positive relationships, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life, and personal growth. In contrast, hope may help students continue working toward meaningful goals and identify different ways of dealing with difficulties. The two theories therefore complement each other. Ryff's model explains the different aspects of psychological well-being, while Snyder's Hope Theory explains how goal-directed thinking may help individuals maintain positive functioning when they face difficulties. Research among university students also supports the importance of considering both psychological symptoms and positive well-being when studying student mental health (Ryff, 1989; Snyder et al., 1991; Baetens et al., 2022).

The proposed model is based on the assumption that psychological distress is negatively related to psychological well-being, but this relationship may vary depending on the level of hope. Students with lower hope may be more affected by distress because they may have less motivation and fewer perceived pathways for dealing with difficulties. Students with higher hope may be better able to maintain motivation, identify alternative solutions, and continue working toward meaningful goals despite psychological difficulties. Research among university students supports this general buffering perspective, including findings that hope can reduce the negative effects of difficult experiences on psychological well-being (Saleem et al., 2023; Dizon et al., 2023).

Despite increasing research on student mental health, there is still a need to examine psychological distress and psychological well-being together while considering positive psychological resources such as hope. Much of the previous research has examined hope as a direct predictor of well-being or has considered its role in relation to other psychological outcomes. Fewer studies have directly examined whether hope changes the strength of the relationship between psychological distress and psychological well-being among university students. This issue is particularly relevant in Pakistan, where research has identified psychological distress and mental health concerns as important issues among university students (Bukhari & Ejaz, 2020; Rasheed et al., 2022).

Therefore, the present study aims to examine the relationship between psychological distress and psychological well-being among university students and to determine whether hope moderates this

relationship. It is expected that psychological distress will be negatively associated with psychological well-being, whereas higher levels of hope will weaken this negative association. The proposed model is mainly supported by Snyder's Hope Theory, which explains goal-directed thinking through agency and pathways, and Ryff's Psychological Well-Being Model, which explains positive psychological functioning through six dimensions of well-being. By examining psychological distress, psychological well-being, and hope together, this study may provide a better understanding of why some university students maintain positive psychological functioning despite experiencing psychological difficulties (Ryff, 1989; Snyder et al., 1991; Rand et al., 2020; Saleem et al., 2023).

Literature

Psychological distress is an important issue among university students because they may experience academic pressure, financial difficulties, social problems, and concerns about their future. These experiences can affect students' mental health and psychological well-being. Research has shown that psychological distress and psychological well-being are related but represent different aspects of mental health. Positive psychological factors, including hope, may also help individuals maintain better psychological functioning when they face difficult situations. Therefore, researchers have examined both psychological distress and positive psychological resources when studying student mental health (El Ansari, 2018).

El Ansari (2018) examined the relationship between psychological distress and psychological well-being among 510 Kuwait University students, including 240 males and 270 females. Psychological distress was assessed through depression and anxiety, while psychological well-being was assessed through happiness, optimism, life satisfaction, and hope. The results showed that happiness, optimism, life satisfaction, and hope were positively related to the well-being side of mental health, whereas depression and anxiety represented the distress side. The factor analysis supported the idea that psychological distress and psychological well-being are related dimensions of mental health but can still be examined separately. The study therefore recommended assessing both negative and positive aspects of mental health rather than focusing only on psychological distress (El Ansari, 2018).

Bernardo and Resurreccion (2018) investigated the relationship between financial stress, hope, and well-being among students from universities in Asia. The researchers examined whether external locus-of-hope could reduce the negative effect of financial stress on students' well-being. The results showed that life satisfaction was negatively predicted by financial stress, while several dimensions of external locus-of-hope were positively related to well-being. More importantly, external-family locus-of-hope moderated the relationship between financial stress and life satisfaction. The negative relationship between financial stress and life satisfaction was not found among students with high external-family hope. These findings suggest that hope-related resources can protect students' well-being when they experience stressful conditions and provide support for examining hope as a moderator in psychological research (Bernardo & Resurreccion, 2018).

Mason (2019) examined gratitude, well-being, and psychological distress among 198 first-year university students in South Africa. The sample consisted of 69.70% female students, with a mean age of 20.55 years. The researchers measured gratitude, flourishing, well-being, depression, and negative emotions. The findings showed that gratitude was positively associated with measures of well-being and negatively associated with indicators of psychological distress. The study suggested that positive psychological characteristics may support students' well-being and may be associated with lower psychological distress. Although the study focused on gratitude rather than hope, it provides evidence that positive psychological factors are relevant when examining the relationship between distress and well-being among university students (Mason, 2019).

Mason (2020) examined hope during the first-year university experience among 296 first-year South African university students. The participants had a mean age of 20.70 years, and 63% were female. The quantitative part of the study examined relationships between hope, flourishing, psychological distress, and academic achievement. The results showed significant relationships among the variables examined, and students who

reported higher levels of hope also achieved higher academic marks than students with lower levels of hope. The study highlighted hope as an important positive psychological factor during the transition into university. These findings are relevant to the present study because they show that hope is associated with important psychological and academic outcomes among university students (Mason, 2020).

Zaman, Abid, and Bilal (2021) examined COVID-19-related psychological distress and psychological well-being among 300 students from different departments of a public university in Pakistan. The researchers used a quantitative survey design and examined whether emotion-regulation strategies played a role in the relationship between psychological distress and psychological well-being. The results showed a significant negative relationship between COVID-19-related psychological distress and psychological well-being. Psychological distress significantly predicted lower psychological well-being, while emotion-regulation strategies mediated this relationship. The findings suggest that students who experience greater psychological distress may report poorer well-being, while effective psychological strategies may help reduce the negative effect of distress on well-being (Zaman et al., 2021).

Prasath et al. (2022) investigated psychological capital, psychological distress, and well-being among 188 international students studying at universities in the United States. Psychological capital included positive psychological resources such as hope, efficacy, resilience, and optimism. The researchers used Hayes' PROCESS analysis to examine the relationships among the variables. The findings showed that well-being mediated the relationship between psychological capital and psychological distress. The study also found a moderating effect of psychological capital on the relationship between psychological capital and depression. These findings indicate that positive psychological resources are important for understanding psychological distress and well-being among international students. Because hope is an important component of psychological capital, this study provides additional support for examining hope as a positive psychological resource in student mental health (Prasath et al., 2022).

Prasath et al. (2023) conducted a particularly relevant study among 387 college students in India. The researchers used a cross-sectional survey design to examine the relationship between psychological distress and well-being and to determine whether psychological capital moderated this relationship. Psychological distress included depression, anxiety, and stress, while psychological capital consisted of hope, efficacy, resilience, and optimism. The results showed that psychological distress was negatively associated with well-being, whereas psychological capital was positively associated with well-being. Most importantly, psychological capital significantly moderated the relationship between psychological distress and well-being. When the components of psychological capital were examined separately, hope, efficacy, resilience, and optimism each acted as moderators. This study provides direct and strong support for the present research model because it shows that hope can change the strength of the relationship between psychological distress and well-being among college students (Prasath et al., 2023).

Murphy (2023) reviewed previous research on hope and well-being and reported consistent evidence for a positive relationship between hope and well-being. The review discussed evidence from different age groups and populations, including students, and concluded that hope is associated with increases in well-being, life satisfaction, positive functioning, and the ability to work toward personal goals. The review also noted that the positive relationship between hope and well-being has continued to be observed in research conducted during difficult circumstances, including the COVID-19 pandemic. These findings support the view that hope may be an important positive psychological factor in maintaining students' well-being (Murphy, 2023).

A 2023 study by Find Joy in Sorrows examined the role of hope in maintaining subjective well-being among 315 undergraduate students in Hong Kong during the COVID-19 pandemic. The participants were recruited from humanities, creative arts, and social sciences programmes through convenience sampling. The study examined positive emotions, hope, and life satisfaction and focused on two components of hope: agency thinking and pathways thinking. The results showed that positive emotions were indirectly related to life satisfaction through agency thinking. The researchers concluded that hope, particularly agency thinking, may

help explain how students maintain positive psychological experiences during difficult circumstances. Although the study examined mediation rather than moderation, it provides additional evidence that hope is relevant to students' subjective well-being during stressful situations (Find Joy in Sorrows, 2023). Overall, research published between 2018 and 2023 provides consistent evidence that psychological distress is associated with poorer psychological well-being, whereas hope is generally associated with better psychological functioning and well-being. Studies have also shown that positive psychological resources may reduce the negative effects of stressful experiences. Most importantly, Prasath et al. (2023) directly demonstrated that hope moderated the relationship between psychological distress and well-being among college students. However, limited research has directly examined this specific model among university students in Pakistan. Therefore, the present study aims to examine psychological distress as an independent variable, psychological well-being as a dependent variable, and hope as a moderator among university students in Pakistan. This model may help explain whether higher hope can reduce the negative effect of psychological distress on students' psychological well-being (Bernardo & Resurreccion, 2018; Zaman et al., 2021; Prasath et al., 2023).

Objectives

- To explore the relationship between psychological distress, hope and psychological wellbeing among university students.
- To examine the moderating role of self-esteem in the relationship between psychological distress and psychological wellbeing among university students

Hypotheses

H1: There will be a significant negative relationship between psychological distress and psychological wellbeing among university students

H2: There will be a significant positive relationship between hope and psychological wellbeing among university students

H3: Hope will moderate the relationship between psychological distress and psychological wellbeing among university students.

Conceptual Framework

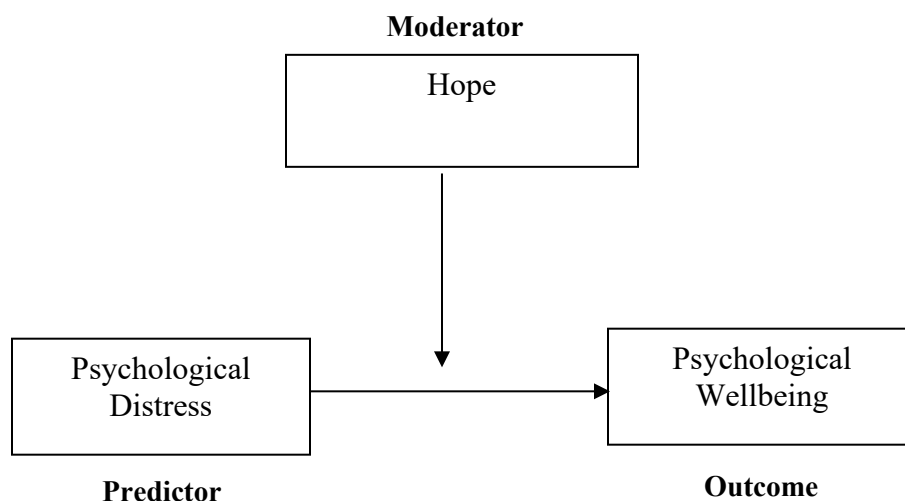


Figure 1: Modular summary for moderation of hope between psychological distress and psychological wellbeing.

Methodology

Participants

The present study was based on cross-sectional survey research design. Sample of the study was consisted of university students ($N=250$) from Bhakkar. Convenience sampling technique was used for data collection. Informed consent was obtained from the participants before administering the questionnaires.

Inclusion Criteria

Participants are between 18 and 30 years of age belong to university studies were included in the study. Only those who gave informed consent and voluntarily agreed to participate were included.

Exclusion Criteria

Individual below 18 or above 30 years age and not belong to university were excluded. Participants who did not provide informed consent or submitted incomplete questionnaires were excluded from the study.

Measurements

Kessler Psychological Distress Scale is constructed Kessler et al. (2002). It is consisted of 10 items. Items are rated on 5-point likert scale and response pattern ranging from *none of the time* = 1 to *all of the time* = 5. Individual can minimum obtain scores 10 whereas maximum scores cannot exceed than 50. Obtained scores on this scale were interpreted in terms of low and high scores rather than cut off scores. Original scale reliability is .93. There are no reverse scoring items.

Trait Hope Scale is constructed by Synder et al. (1991). It is consisted of 12 items. Items are rated on 8-point likert type scale and response pattern ranging from *definitely false* = 1 to *definitely true* = 8. Individual can minimum obtain scores 12 whereas maximum scores cannot exceed than 96. Obtained scores on this scale were interpreted in terms of low and high scores rather than cut off scores. Original scale reliability is .84. This scale has 3, 5, 7, 11 items are reverse scoring items.

Psychological wellbeing scale is constructed by Ryff and Keyes (1995). It is consisted of 18 items. Items are rated on 7-point likert type scale and response pattern ranging from *strongly agree* = 1 to *strongly disagree* = 7. Individual can minimum obtain scores 18 whereas maximum scores cannot exceed than 126. Obtained scores on this scale were interpreted in terms of low and high scores rather than cut off scores. Original scale reliability is .84. This scale has 1, 2, 3, 8, 9, 11, 12, 13, 17, 18 items are reverse scoring items.

Procedure

The researcher approached each participant and encouraged them to take part in the study. They were informed that their responses would be used only for academic purposes and would remain confidential at all stages. Those who agreed to participate were asked to sign an informed consent form. After this, they were given simple instructions to fill out the questionnaires and provide their responses. If any participant had difficulty understanding any question, the researcher explained it clearly and helped them complete the forms properly. After completing the questionnaires, the researcher thanked all participants for their voluntary participation without any payment or reward. Their contribution was appreciated as it helps in adding value to psychological research.

Results

Table 1

Pearson Correlation among study variables

Variables	M	SD	A	1	2	3
Psychological distress	31.48	8.41	.72	---	-.54***	-.49***
Hope	73.15	12.73	.81		---	.61***
Psychological wellbeing	69.98	14.36	.86			---

Note: $N = 250$, *** $p < .001$,

Table shows Pearson correlation among study variables. The findings indicate that psychological distress is significant negative correlation with hope ($r = -.54$, $p < .001$) and significant negative correlation with psychological wellbeing ($r = -.49$, $p < .001$). The hope and psychological wellbeing have significant positive correlation. ($r = .61$, $p = .001$).

Table 02

Moderation of Hope between Psychological Distress and Psychological Wellbeing

Variables	Model 1			Model 2		
	B	B	SE	B	β	SE
Constant	69.31***		.21	27.52***		.39
Psychological distress	-6.13***	-.57***	.32	-5.38***	-.37***	.31
Hope	3.79***	.39***	.33	4.64***	.46***	.35
Psychological distress x Hope				3.67***	.18**	.41
R^2	.41			.46		
ΔR^2				.05		

$N = 250$

Table shows the moderation of Hope between psychological distress and psychological wellbeing. In model 1, the R^2 value of .41 revealed that the predictors explained 41% variance in the outcome with $F(2, 247) = 289.27$, $p < .001$. The finding revealed that psychological distress is significantly negative ($\beta = -.56$, $p < .001$) and hope ($\beta = .39$, $p < .001$) are significantly positive effect on psychological wellbeing. In Model 2, the R^2 value of .44 revealed that the predictors explained 44% variance in the outcome with $F(3, 246) = 328.41$, $p < .001$. The finding revealed that psychological distress ($\beta = -.37$, $p < .001$) hope ($\beta = .46$, $p < .001$) and psychological distress x hope significantly effect on psychological wellbeing ($\beta = .18$, $p < .01$). The ΔR^2 value of .03 revealed 3% change in the variance of model 1 and model 2 with $\Delta F(1, 246) = 41.56$, $p < .001$. Finding show that hope moderates the relationship between psychological distress and psychological wellbeing.

Discussion

The present study examined the relationship between psychological distress and psychological well-being among university students. It also examined the relationship between hope and psychological well-being and tested whether hope could change the relationship between psychological distress and psychological well-being. The findings supported all three hypotheses of the study. Overall, the results suggest that students' psychological well-being is related to both negative psychological experiences and positive psychological resources. Psychological distress may reduce students' well-being, while hope may help students maintain better psychological functioning when they face difficulties (Selvaraj & Bhat, 2018).

The first hypothesis stated that there would be a significant negative relationship between psychological distress and psychological well-being among university students. The findings supported this hypothesis. This means that students who experienced higher psychological distress were more likely to report lower

psychological well-being. Psychological distress may include stress, anxiety, emotional pressure, and difficulty in dealing with daily problems. When these problems become stronger, students may find it more difficult to feel satisfied with their lives, manage their emotions, and maintain positive relationships. Therefore, higher psychological distress can be linked with poorer psychological well-being (Fila & Eatough, 2017).

According to Fila and Eatough (2017) examined the effects of illegitimate tasks among students and found that these stressful experiences were related to student dissatisfaction, anxiety, and emotional exhaustion. Their study showed that stress-related demands can have negative effects on students' psychological experiences. Although their study did not use psychological distress as the main independent variable, the findings support the idea that stressful experiences can reduce students' positive psychological functioning. The present study reached a similar conclusion because students with higher psychological distress reported lower psychological well-being (Fila & Eatough, 2017).

The negative relationship between distress and well-being can also be understood from the wider mental health perspective. University students are often required to manage academic work, examinations, relationships, financial concerns, and future career decisions at the same time. When students are unable to manage these pressures effectively, psychological distress may increase. Continuous distress can then affect their emotions, motivation, social relationships, and satisfaction with life. Therefore, the present finding supports the need to identify and reduce psychological distress among university students (Selvaraj & Bhat, 2018).

The second hypothesis stated that there would be a significant positive relationship between hope and psychological well-being among university students. This hypothesis was supported. The results indicate that students with higher levels of hope tended to report better psychological well-being. Hope is related to having goals, believing that goals can be achieved, and finding different ways to reach those goals. Students who have higher hope may therefore be more likely to think positively about their future and continue working toward their goals even when they experience difficulties (Rand et al., 2020).

According to Rand et al. (2020) examined 334 undergraduate students over two points during one academic semester. The researchers found that hope predicted increases in positive affect and life satisfaction over the semester. Hope also helped predict academic expectations and academic performance through grade expectancy. These findings provide strong support for the present hypothesis because they show that hope is not only related to academic outcomes but can also contribute to positive changes in subjective well-being. The present study similarly found that greater hope was associated with better psychological well-being (Rand et al., 2020).

Muyan-Yılık and Demir (2020) studied 1,222 undergraduate students from a public university in Ankara, Turkey. The proposed model explained a substantial amount of variance in students' subjective well-being, and hope was an important part of the model. The findings suggest that students who have greater hope and flexible ways of dealing with problems may experience better well-being. These results are consistent with the present finding that hope has a positive relationship with students' psychological well-being (Muyan-Yılık & Demir, 2020).

Ali et al. (2022) examined mindfulness, gratitude, hopefulness, and psychological well-being among young people in Pakistan. The researchers collected data from Pakistani young adults and obtained 374 usable responses. Their findings showed that positive psychological factors were related to psychological well-being, while hopefulness played an important role in the relationship between positive psychological experiences and well-being. This finding is especially relevant to the present study because it provides evidence from Pakistan and supports the importance of hope in understanding positive psychological functioning among young people (Ali et al., 2022).

The third hypothesis stated that hope would moderate the relationship between psychological distress and psychological well-being among university students. The findings supported this hypothesis. This means that

the relationship between psychological distress and psychological well-being was different depending on the level of hope. In simple words, hope appeared to reduce the negative effect of psychological distress on psychological well-being. Students with higher hope may be better able to maintain their well-being when they experience psychological difficulties (Güngör et al., 2021).

Güngör et al. (2021) found that hope was one of the positive psychological factors that could protect students from the negative effects of difficult life experiences. Their study showed that hope was important in understanding the relationship between negative life events and psychological distress. This finding supports the present moderation result because it suggests that positive psychological resources can influence how strongly stressful experiences affect students' psychological outcomes (Güngör et al., 2021).

The moderating role of hope can be explained by the way hopeful students deal with difficult situations. A student with high hope may experience distress but still believe that there are possible ways to deal with the problem. Such students may be more willing to change their plans, look for support, or try another solution. In contrast, students with low hope may feel that they have fewer options and may find it harder to manage psychological difficulties. Therefore, hope may weaken the negative connection between psychological distress and psychological well-being (Güngör et al., 2021; Flesia et al., 2023).

All study findings show that psychological distress and hope have different roles in students' psychological well-being. Psychological distress was negatively related to well-being, whereas hope was positively related to well-being. The moderation finding adds another important point because it suggests that hope may not only improve well-being directly but may also protect students from the harmful effects of psychological distress. This supports a more balanced approach to student mental health that focuses on reducing psychological problems as well as developing positive psychological strengths (Selvaraj & Bhat, 2018; Rand et al., 2020).

Implications

The findings have practical implications for universities, teachers, counselors, and student support services. Universities can provide counseling programs that help students manage stress, anxiety, and other forms of psychological distress. At the same time, counseling programs can include activities that develop hope, goal setting, problem-solving, and positive future thinking. The results of a randomized controlled trial among 174 university undergraduates in Singapore showed that a HOPE intervention improved mental health literacy and reduced personal stigma, although it did not produce significant changes in psychological well-being or stress. This suggests that hope-related interventions may be useful but should be designed carefully and evaluated over time (Tay et al., 2022).

Limitations and suggestions

The present study has some limitations. First, the cross-sectional design does not allow strong conclusions about cause and effect. It is not possible to determine whether psychological distress causes lower well-being or whether lower well-being increases distress. Second, the study used self-report questionnaires, so participants' responses may have been affected by their current emotions or personal understanding. Third, the study focused on university students, which may limit the generalization of the findings to other populations. Future studies should use longitudinal designs and include students from different universities and backgrounds (Tay et al., 2022).

Future researchers should use longitudinal and experimental designs to understand whether increasing hope can actually reduce the negative effect of psychological distress on well-being. Future studies may also include other positive psychological factors such as resilience, optimism, self-efficacy, gratitude, and social support. Researchers should also examine students from different cities, universities, and educational backgrounds to improve the generalizability of findings. Intervention-based research may be particularly useful because it can show whether developing hope can produce meaningful improvements in students' psychological well-being

Conclusion

In conclusion, the present study shows that psychological distress is an important negative factor related to university students' psychological well-being. At the same time, hope is an important positive factor associated with better well-being. The moderation finding further suggests that hope may protect students from some of the negative effects of psychological distress. Therefore, understanding and strengthening positive psychological resources such as hope may be useful for improving students' mental health and overall well-being (Flesia et al., 2023; Rand et al., 2020).

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