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Assessing Psychological Well-Being among University Students: A Gender-Based Comparative Analysis

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Assessing Psychological Well-Being among University Students: A Gender-Based Comparative Analysis

Rekha Kumari¹, Radha Kumari², Meenakshi³, Samiran Chakraborty⁴

Abstract

Background: Psychological well-being (PWB) is a critical determinant of students' academic success and overall life functioning, making its assessment essential within higher education contexts. **Purpose:** This study examined gender-based differences in PWB among university students across Ryff's (1989) six-dimensional framework, encompassing autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relations with others, purpose in life, and self-acceptance. **Methodology:** A total of 618 students (375 male, 243 female; age range 18–28 years, $M = 21.4$, $SD = 2.1$) from various colleges of the University of Delhi participated in this cross-sectional study. Participants were selected through purposive sampling. An a priori power analysis using the *pwr* package in R (v4.6.0) confirmed adequate sample size. The 42-item Ryff's Psychological Well-being Scale was administered, and data were analysed using descriptive statistics and independent samples *t*-tests via SPSS (v22.0), with significance set at $p < .05$. **Results:** No significant gender differences were observed in autonomy ($t = -0.106$, $p > .05$), environmental mastery ($t = 1.482$, $p > .05$), positive relations ($t = -1.272$, $p > .05$), purpose in life ($t = -0.555$, $p > .05$), and self-acceptance ($t = -0.343$, $p > .05$). However, female students scored significantly higher on personal growth ($t = -2.354$, $p < .05$, $d = 0.19$), reflecting a stronger orientation toward self-development. **Conclusions:** Findings suggest a broadly equitable psychological environment across genders, with females demonstrating greater personal growth orientation. Universities should implement gender-sensitive counselling and well-being programmes to support holistic student development.

Keywords: psychological well-being, gender differences, Ryff's model, university students, personal growth, eudaimonic well-being, India, higher education

1 Introduction

Psychological well-being (PWB) has become a primary focus in modern psychology and education, as it serves a significant role in fostering healthy development and enhancing an individual's ability to perform daily activities effectively. (Diener, 2000). Mental well-being is not simply about avoiding sadness or feeling happy for a short time; it is about maintaining a balanced and healthy state of mind that supports overall quality of life, psychological well-being represents a person's deeper ability to manage life's challenges, maintain meaningful social connections, and reach their full potential (Ryan & Deci, 2001). The scientific study of what enables individuals and communities to flourish has been broadly situated within the positive psychology movement, which emphasises strengths, virtues, and optimal functioning rather than psychopathology alone (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). By focusing on how people thrive, researchers can better understand the factors that lead to a balanced and fulfilling life.

A widely endorsed framework for understanding this concept is the six-dimensional model

developed by Carol D. Ryff. This model suggests that well-being is built upon six key pillars: autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relations with others, purpose in life, and self-acceptance (Ryff, 1989; Ryff & Singer, 2006). Rather than looking at mental health through the lens of illness or distress, this multidimensional approach highlights psychological flourishing, emphasising the importance of self-development and finding a sense of meaning in one's existence (Ryff & Keyes, 1995; Keyes et al., 2002). This eudaimonic conception of well-being stands in distinction to hedonic frameworks that emphasise pleasure and the absence of pain (Ryan & Deci, 2001; Fredrickson, 2001). Research grounded in the broaden-and-build theory further suggests that positive emotions and psychological flourishing expand cognitive and social resources, reinforcing the case for promoting well-being in institutional settings (Fredrickson, 2001). Research Scholars have also noted that the structure and correlates of well-being may vary considerably across cultural contexts, making it essential to validate these frameworks within non-Western and collectivist societies such as India (Joshnloo & Weijers, 2014). The psychometric validity of Ryff's model has been further confirmed through structural assessments across diverse populations, supporting its continued use as a robust measure of eudaimonic functioning (Springer & Hauser, 2006; Van Dierendonck, 2004).

The university years are a critical time for personal growth, often described as a bridge between adolescence and full adulthood (Arnett, 2000). During this phase, students face a unique set of academic, social, and emotional pressures that can significantly influence their mental health (Bewick et al., 2010). Research indicates that students with higher levels of well-being are generally more motivated, emotionally stable, and better at adjusting to the demands of higher education (Keyes et al., 2002). Conversely, a lack of psychological balance can lead to increased stress, anxiety, and social difficulties, which may ultimately harm a student's academic progress (Diener & Chan, 2011). In India specifically, academic competition, examination pressure, and parental expectations have been identified as significant stressors that compound the psychological burden on university students (Nagle & Sharma, 2018; Gull et al., 2025). Emerging evidence also links subjective well-being to long-term health outcomes, underscoring the significance of promoting psychological wellness during the formative university years (Steptoe et al., 2015). Gender is another essential factor to consider, as male and female students often experience and cope with university life in different ways (Matud et al., 2015). Some studies suggest that female students tend to prioritise social connections and emotional awareness, while male students may show higher levels of independence and confidence (Ryff, 1989). However, these findings are often inconsistent across different cultures and educational settings (Springer et al., 2011). In the Indian context, where students face high academic competition and strong family expectations, gender roles may play a significant part in shaping their psychological experiences (Bano & Vyas, 2012). Gender-based differences in coping styles, emotional regulation, and social support-seeking further modulate the relationship between stress and psychological well-being among young adults (Verma & Sharma, 2018). The role of self-determination encompassing autonomy, competence, and relatedness has also been shown to be central to understanding how students of both genders maintain psychological health within academic contexts (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Despite the importance of this topic, there is a need for more detailed research that explores these gender differences within major Indian academic institutions. This study is conducted to address this gap by comparing the psychological well-being of male and female students at the University of Delhi across the six dimensions proposed by Ryff. The primary objective is to understand how gender influences the way students navigate their academic and personal lives. By identifying these patterns, the findings can help teachers, counsellors, and university administrators design more effective mental health programmes and supportive environments (Gull et al., 2025; Nagle & Sharma, 2018). Ultimately, this research aims to provide valuable

insights that benefit both students and educational institutions in fostering a culture of well-being and academic success (Seligman, 2011; Ryff & Singer, 2008).

2 Methods

2.1 Participants

An a priori power analysis was conducted using the pwr package in R (v4.6.0) to determine the minimum required sample size for detecting meaningful psychological differences. Based on Cohen's (1988) conventions, a medium effect size ($d = 0.50$) was targeted. For the gender-wise comparison (independent samples t-test) at a 0.05 significance level and 0.80 power, the analysis indicated a minimum requirement of 128 participants ($n = 64$ per group). The actual sample for the current study significantly exceeded this requirement, comprising 618 ($N = 618$) students from various constituent colleges of the University of Delhi, selected through convenience sampling. The sample distribution consisted of 375 male students (60.68%) and 243 female students (39.32 %). Participants ranged in age from 18 to 28 years ($M = 21.4$, $SD = 2.1$). All participants were enrolled in undergraduate or postgraduate programmes at the time of data collection. The unequal distribution across gender groups is acknowledged as a limitation and is discussed accordingly. The inclusion of 618 participants ensures high statistical power and enhances the reliability and trustworthiness of the findings.

2.2 Criterion Measure

Ryff's Psychological Well-being Scale (PWB), the 42-item version, was employed to evaluate the multidimensional psychological functioning of the participants. This psychometric instrument measures six distinct theoretical dimensions: Autonomy, Environmental Mastery, Personal Growth, Positive Relations with Others, Purpose in Life, and Self-Acceptance, with each domain comprising seven items. Participants responded to each statement using a 6-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 6 (Strongly Agree). To maintain internal consistency, negatively phrased items (including items 3, 10, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 23, 26, 27, 30, 31, 32, 34, 36, 39, and 41) were reverse-coded during the data preparation phase. Cumulative scores for each subscale were calculated, where higher aggregate scores signify a more robust state of psychological well-being. Internal consistency of the scale in the present sample was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, yielding acceptable to good reliability coefficients across the six subscales: Autonomy ($\alpha = .71$), Environmental Mastery ($\alpha = .73$), Personal Growth ($\alpha = .69$), Positive Relations with Others ($\alpha = .74$), Purpose in Life ($\alpha = .72$), and Self-Acceptance ($\alpha = .76$). These values are consistent with those reported in prior validation studies (Ryff & Keyes, 1995; Van Dierendonck, 2004), confirming the scale's psychometric appropriateness for the present sample.

2.3 Procedure

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the relevant institutional authority prior to data collection, and all procedures were conducted in accordance with established ethical guidelines for research involving human participants. The data collection was carried out through planned visits to different constituent colleges of the University of Delhi. After obtaining the required permissions, participants were gathered in a suitable setting where the researcher briefly explained the purpose of the study and the importance of their participation. The Ryff's Psychological Well-being Scale was administered manually to all respondents. Before filling out the questionnaire, clear and standardised instructions were provided to help participants understand the 6-point response format and reduce the possibility of response bias. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to their involve-

ment in the study. Participants were assured that their responses would remain anonymous and confidential and would be used solely for academic research purposes. During the administration process, the researcher remained present to address any doubts or clarifications immediately. After completion, all questionnaires were carefully checked for completeness and accuracy before being prepared for statistical analysis.

2.4 Statistical Analysis

Data were analysed using SPSS (v22.0), utilising descriptive statistics to summarise the psychological well-being dimensions across gender groups. Levene's test for equality of variances was examined prior to the independent samples t-test to ensure that the assumption of homogeneity of variances was appropriately addressed. An independent samples t-test was then performed to evaluate gender-based differences across all six PWB sub-variables. Cohen's d was calculated to determine the practical significance of any statistically significant findings. The level of significance was maintained at $p = .05$ to ensure the empirical validity of the findings.

3 Results

The raw data were processed using SPSS (v22.0) to compute descriptive statistics and Independent Samples T-tests. The following sections present the empirical findings through structured tables and graphical representations, highlighting the comparative analysis of the participants' psychological well-being.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Psychological Well-being Dimensions Based on Gender among University of Delhi Students

Dimension	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Autonomy	Male	375	29.893	4.6886	.2421
	Female	243	29.938	5.8381	.3745
Environmental Mastery	Male	375	28.157	4.1437	.2140
	Female	243	27.650	4.1716	.2676
Personal Growth	Male	375	31.880	6.2398	.3222
	Female	243	33.095	6.3085	.4047
Positive Relations	Male	375	29.776	5.8550	.3024
	Female	243	30.399	6.0917	.3908
Purpose in Life	Male	375	30.400	5.8346	.3013
	Female	243	30.667	5.8451	.3750
Self-Acceptance	Male	375	30.709	5.6671	.2926
	Female	243	30.877	6.2801	.4029

The table reveals the descriptive analysis of various dimensions of Psychological Well-being among the participants, categorized by gender. It was found that the mean value and standard deviation for the dimension of Autonomy were 29.89 ± 4.68 for males and 29.93 ± 5.83 for females. For Environmental Mastery, the mean and standard deviation values were found to be 28.15 ± 4.14 and 27.65 ± 4.17 for males and females, respectively. In the dimension of Personal Growth, which showed the most notable difference, the mean value for males was 31.88 ± 6.23 , while for females it was 33.09 ± 6.30 . Regarding Positive Relations, the mean scores were 29.77 ± 5.85 for males and 30.39 ± 6.09 for females. The analysis further shows that for Purpose in Life, the mean and standard deviation values for males and females were 30.40 ± 5.83 and 30.66 ± 5.84 , respectively. Lastly, for Self-Acceptance, the mean values were

recorded as 30.70 ± 5.66 for males and 30.87 ± 6.28 for females. Overall, the aggregate mean value for psychological well-being across the total sample indicates a consistent trend across genders, with females scoring slightly higher in the majority of dimensions, particularly in Personal Growth.

Table 2: Independent Samples *t*-Test for Comparison of Psychological Well-being

Dimension	Levene's Test		t-test for Equality of Means					95% CI	
	<i>F</i>	Sig.	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	Sig.	MD	SED	Lower	Upper
Autonomy	12.398	.000	-.106	616	.916	-.0449	.4258	-.8812	.7913
Environmental Mastery	.643	.423	1.482	616	.139	.5071	.3421	-.1648	1.1790
Personal Growth	.003	.960	-2.354	616	.019	-1.2147	.5161	-2.2282	-.2011
Positive Relations	.253	.615	-1.272	616	.204	-.6232	.4899	-1.5853	.3389
Purpose in Life	.632	.427	-.555	616	.579	-.2667	.4808	-1.2109	.6776
Self-Acceptance	2.116	.146	-.343	616	.732	-.1672	.4872	-1.1239	.7895

Note. *df* = Degree of Freedom; MD = Mean Difference; SED = Standard Error Difference; CI = Confidence Interval.

Prior to interpreting the *t*-test results, Levene's test for equality of variances was examined for each dimension. Results indicated a statistically significant violation of the homogeneity of variance assumption for the dimension of Autonomy ($F = 12.398$, $p = .000$), suggesting that the variances between male and female groups were not equal for this dimension. Accordingly, the equal variances not assumed row should be consulted for Autonomy when drawing inferential conclusions. For all remaining five dimensions, Levene's test was non-significant ($p > .05$), confirming that the assumption of equal variances was met and that the standard independent samples *t*-test results are appropriate for interpretation. The independent samples *t*-test revealed no statistically significant gender differences in five of the six PWB dimensions. The *t*-value for Autonomy was 0.106 ($p = .916$), for Environmental Mastery it was 1.482 ($p = .139$), for Positive Relations it was 1.272 ($p = .204$), for Purpose in Life it was 0.555 ($p = .579$), and for Self-Acceptance it was 0.343 ($p = .732$). None of these values reached the pre-established significance threshold of $p = .05$.

However, a statistically significant gender difference was observed in the dimension of Personal Growth ($t = -2.354$, $df = 616$, $p = .019$). The mean difference of -1.2147 indicated that female students ($M = 33.09$, $SD = 6.31$) scored significantly higher than their male counterparts ($M = 31.88$, $SD = 6.24$) on this dimension. The effect size was calculated as Cohen's $d = 0.19$, indicating a small but statistically meaningful practical effect. The 95% confidence interval for the mean difference ranged from -2.2282 to -0.2011 , further confirming the significance of this finding.

4 Discussion

The present study aimed to examine gender-based differences in psychological well-being (PWB) among University of Delhi students using Ryff's (1989) six-dimensional framework. The findings are discussed dimension-wise below. The present study examined gender-based differences in psychological well-being among University of Delhi students across Ryff's (1989) six dimensions. No statistically significant difference was found between male and female students on the dimensions of Autonomy, Environmental Mastery, Positive Relations with Others, Purpose in Life, and Self-Acceptance. This uniformity may be attributed to the shared academic environment of the university, where both genders were exposed to equal institutional structures, resources, and competitive demands, thereby fostering comparable levels of psychological functioning. Such findings resonate with self-determination theory

(Deci & Ryan, 2000), which posits that when environmental conditions adequately support the basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness, individuals regardless of gender are likely to exhibit similar profiles of psychological functioning. The present findings are also supported by Springer et al. (2011) and Bano and Vyas (2012), who similarly reported no significant gender differences in core PWB dimensions within academic settings characterised by equitable opportunities. Furthermore, Akhter (2015) observed comparable patterns among Indian student samples, noting that the shared academic setting tends to minimise gender-based disparities across most well-being dimensions. The findings also align with the broader literature suggesting that gender differences in psychological well-being are dimension-specific rather than global, and are frequently moderated by social role expectations and institutional context (Matud et al., 2015; Joshanloo & Weijers, 2014). Therefore, the null hypotheses for these dimensions Autonomy, Environmental Mastery, Positive Relations with Others, Purpose in Life, and Self-Acceptance dimensions failed to be rejected (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Akhter, 2015; Joshanloo & Weijers, 2014)

However, a statistically significant gender difference was observed in Personal Growth, with female students scoring higher than their male counterparts. This suggests that female students exhibit a stronger orientation toward continuous self-development and openness to new experiences. This finding may be explained by the evolving socio-cultural landscape of Indian higher education, where female students increasingly view university life as a transformative opportunity for self-actualization, and where navigating gender-related societal expectations may further stimulate personal development as a coping strategy. The broaden-and-build theory (Fredrickson, 2001) provides a complementary theoretical lens through which this result can be understood: positive emotions and adaptive coping strategies, which are more commonly reported in female students navigating social challenges, may accumulate over time to build personal resources, including greater openness to growth. The present findings are supported by Ryff (1989) and Matud et al. (2015), who noted that women tend to prioritise personal growth as a means of managing academic and social pressures. Similar findings were also reported by Keyes et al. (2002). The result further corroborates Verma and Sharma (2018), who found that Indian female students reported greater personal development orientation compared to their male peers, particularly in urban university settings. Additionally, Steptoe et al. (2015) noted that eudaimonic well-being, including sense of purpose and personal growth, has particular significance for long-term health outcomes, lending further weight to the importance of nurturing these qualities among female university students. Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) similarly underscored that institutions which actively cultivate strengths and growth-oriented environments are better positioned to support psychological flourishing for all students. Therefore, the null hypothesis for the dimension of Personal Growth was rejected (Fredrickson, 2001; Verma & Sharma, 2018; Steptoe et al., 2015; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

5 Conclusion

The present study investigated gender-based differences in psychological well-being among University of Delhi students using Ryff's six-dimensional framework. The findings largely indicated that male and female students do not differ significantly in their overall psychological well-being, as both groups demonstrated comparable levels of Autonomy, Environmental Mastery, Positive Relations with Others, Purpose in Life, and Self-Acceptance. This suggests that the contemporary Indian university environment provides a broadly equitable psychological landscape for students of both genders. However, the study also revealed that female students scored significantly higher on the dimension of Personal Growth, reflecting a stronger commitment to self-development and openness to new experiences. This finding

highlights the evolving role of higher education in empowering female students toward greater self-actualization within the changing socio-cultural context of India. Overall, the study contributes to the growing body of literature on gender and psychological well-being in Indian academic settings and underscores the importance of fostering an inclusive university environment that supports the holistic well-being of all students. Future research may explore additional variables such as socioeconomic background, academic stream, and family environment to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing psychological well-being among university students.

6 Limitations

The present study has various limitations that should be considered when evaluating the results. First, the differential distribution of male (60.68%) and female (39.32%) participants may limit statistical comparability between groups; this should be addressed in future investigations using proportionate or stratified sampling. Second, the study's cross-sectional methodology prohibits the identification of the causal relationship between gender and psychological well-being. Third, the sample was obtained primarily from the University of Delhi, limiting the findings' applicability to other Indian universities and cultural environments. Fourth, using self-report measures increases the risk of social desirability bias and response distortion. Finally, significant demographic and contextual variables such as age, academic stream, socioeconomic background, and family environment were not investigated, despite the fact that they may all have an independent impact on students' psychological well-being.

7 Recommendation

By integrating structured learning modules on self-awareness, emotional regulation, and personal growth into the academic curriculum, universities should place a high priority on promoting psychological well-being. Gender-sensitive support programs must also be implemented by counseling services, with a focus on enhancing male students' personal and emotional development. In order to offer students private and easily accessible psychological help, educational institutions should also set up special well-being centers manned by qualified mental health specialists. Regular training is necessary to enable faculty members to recognize symptoms of psychological distress and foster a supportive learning environment. By supporting peer mentorship programs that assist students in managing academic stress while enhancing interpersonal ties and social support, institutions can further improve the well-being of their students. Additionally, frequent workshops and mental health awareness campaigns are to be planned. Additionally, to lessen stigma and encourage students to seek help without fear, frequent workshops and awareness campaigns about mental health should be held.

8 Future Implications

Future studies should use larger, more geographically diversified, and proportionally balanced samples to improve the generalizability of findings. Researchers are urged to look into new social, academic, and cultural factors that may influence psychological well-being. Longitudinal and mixed-method study designs may provide more information about how well-being evolves over time and how students face psychological problems in various academic settings. Future research should focus on planning, implementing, and evaluating focused intervention programs that can effectively promote psychological well-being across all dimensions of Ryff's model for Indian university students.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest associated with this article.

Use of Artificial Intelligence

The authors declare that artificial intelligence tools were used for language improvement and/or formatting assistance. The authors take full responsibility for the originality, accuracy, interpretation, and final content of the article.

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