

The Educational Trajectory of Resilience: A Comparative Study of Psychological Well-being, Academic Stress, and Social Media Engagement Between Undergraduate and Postgraduate Social Work Students

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ABSTRACT

Background: Well-being, academic stress, and social media are important aspects of a student's life, particularly those pursuing education in social work. The differences that exist among undergraduate students and postgraduate students in terms of these variables need to be considered seriously.

Method: The cross-sectional study involved 370 BSW and MSW students from different districts of Karnataka who were recruited using purposive sampling. The methods used for data collection were structured questionnaires to measure socio-demographic attributes, social networking habits, academic stress (using DECORE-Student scale) and psychological well-being. The statistical tools included descriptive statistics, Chi-square test, ANOVA, and logistic regression.

Results: The participants in the MSW program showed significantly increased social media usage ($p = 0.001$) and cognitive academic stress ($p = 0.018$) than those in the Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) program. The MSW students also had higher scores on measures of psychological well-being, such as autonomy ($p = 0.002$), positive relations ($p = 0.001$), purpose in life ($p = 0.023$), self-acceptance ($p = 0.022$), and general well-being ($p = 0.009$). Logistic regression analysis found that gender ($p = 0.012$), educational attainment ($p \leq 0.003$), and residency location ($p = 0.015$) were significant predictors

Conclusion: While postgraduates had higher academic pressure and usage of social media, they showed better psychological well-being, suggesting that the role of development and resilience could be seen here. Stage-appropriate measures should be applied, especially for undergraduates, to improve their coping mechanisms and psychological well-being.

Keywords: Psychological well-being, Academic stress, Social media use, Social work students, Resilience

INTRODUCTION

The shift from undergraduate to postgraduate social work education plays an important role in shaping students' experiences of psychological well being, academic stress, and social media usage. In higher education, psychological well being is increasingly considered as an essential indicator of how the students will perform in terms of their own growth in various aspects (Ryff, 1989; Chaudhry et al., 2024). The students who have higher degrees of well being are better at engaging themselves in their education, developing productive relationships, and handling different obstacles (Chaudhry et al., 2024; Ryff, 1989). Academic stress is a very common issue for any university student, and many researchers have proven that increased levels of academic stress negatively affect the well being of students, especially those who study at colleges (Barbayannis, 2022; Gao et al, 2018). Social work students similarly experience moderate to high stress levels, and these pressures can undermine their resilience and emotional health (Wilks, 2008; O'Neill, 2019).

Social media usage has become an essential part of students' everyday life, with various impacts on their psychological well-being. Social media can be beneficial to communication, cooperation in educational activities, and social interaction (Valkenburg et al., 2022; Sahoo et al., 2024). On the other hand, overuse and problematically unhealthy social media engagement result in higher anxiety levels, insomnia, and poor academic results (Levenson et al., 2016; Dhir et al., 2018; Tran et al., 2019).

Cross-sectional research carried out recently among college students demonstrated that very high social media usage was often connected with poorer psychological well-being, while mindful and moderate social media engagement had no negative impact or even positive consequences (Ostic et al., 2021; Sahoo et al., 2024). In social work education, recent research shows that self-care strategies, social support, and resilience could help cope with stress from academic life and excessive technology exposure (Wilks, 2008; O'Neill, 2019; Beddoe et al., 2024).

However, even with the above insights, there is limited literature that explores the systematic disparities between the psychological wellbeing, academic stress, and social media use of BSW and MSW students. The recognition of the above disparities is important in helping institutions and social work practitioners design interventions that target specific stages of a student's education. As such, the current study explores the path of resilience through the education process in terms of psychological wellbeing, academic stress, and social media use among BSW and MSW students.

Method

The study was conducted using a cross-sectional research methodology to examine socio-demographic, educational, health, and psychological factors. This study compared social media usage, academic stress (reward, cognitive, control, support dimensions, and overall academic stress), and psychological well-being among BSW Year 2, BSW Year 3, and MSW Year 2 students in Karnataka.

Sampling

Sample size has been calculated using a common cross-sectional formula at 95% confidence interval ($Z=1.96$). The Margin of Error is estimated at 5% ($d=0.05$) and proportion is assumed at 0.5, giving an estimated sample size between 360-380. Therefore by employing purposive sampling technique, a total of 370 undergraduate and postgraduate students pursuing BSW and MSW from various districts have been sampled including Dakshina Kannada ($n=82$), Udupi ($n=33$), Hassan ($n=29$), Kolar ($n=34$), Tumakuru ($n=18$), Shivamogga ($n=23$), Bagalkot ($n=12$), and other districts/universities ($n=139$).

Tools

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire with three sections: socio-demographic and clinical details, social media use, and academic stress.

Socio-Demographic and Clinical Data Sheet

This segment was used for collecting information on various variables such as age, gender, current location, family composition, and marital status. Information regarding the income of families, occupations, and educational qualifications of their parents was taken into account. Students disclosed information about their accommodation, number of brothers/sisters, and household duties they perform. In terms of educational background, language of instructions, institution attended, mode of transport, and travelling time were considered.

Social Media Use Questionnaire

In this section, the use of social media was determined. The respondents provided the number of hours they spend daily, the types of social media utilized (such as WhatsApp, Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube), as well as the reasons for using it (communication, academic purposes, news reading, and leisure). The consequences of its impact on their studies and how they felt afterwards were also mentioned.

Academic Stress Questionnaire

The academic stress was assessed based on the 30-item scale taken from the DECORE-Student questionnaire developed by Luceño-Moreno et al. (2023). This tool is composed of four categories: reward (perception of justice and satisfaction regarding their results), cognitive (amount of work, time pressure, and difficulty of tasks), control (independence and flexibility), and support (support from peers and staff). The students responded to the statements on a five-point Likert scale where 1 was strongly disagree, and 5 was strongly agree.

Data Collection Procedure

Data collection was carried out by the lead researcher using a well-planned process. First, the lead researcher went to the selected colleges and discussed the objective of the study with the college principal. Once the formal consent was received, the researcher visited the students' classroom. Here, the purpose and aims of the study were communicated effectively along with the reason for participation in the research process. All students were told that participation is voluntary in nature, and any doubts or queries were clarified at this stage. Written consent of participants was taken in this regard. For a comfortable environment, appropriate seating was arranged. Honest answers were requested from the students. The questionnaire was filled out using Google form links sent to students via their teachers.

Statistical Analysis: The collected data were first entered into Microsoft Excel and then transferred to IBM SPSS Statistics for analysis. Descriptive statistics, including mean and standard deviation, were used to summarize the findings. The Chi-square test was applied to examine the association between academic years. As the data were normally distributed, Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was used to assess differences between continuous variables. A p-value of less than 0.05 was considered statistically significant.

Table 1: Socio-Demographic Profile of Respondents by Course

Variable	Category	BSW – 2nd Year (n=155)	BSW – 3rd Year (n=148)	MSW – 2nd Year (n=67)	χ^2	p-value
Age	18–20	140 (90.3)	107 (72.3)	4 (6.0)	154.81	<0.001
	21–23	15 (9.7)	41 (27.7)	63 (94.0)		
Gender	Male	47 (30.3)	58 (39.2)	34 (50.7)	8.6	0.014
	Female	108 (69.7)	90 (60.8)	33 (49.3)		
Place of Residence	Rural	139 (89.7)	130 (87.8)	57 (85.1)	0.96	0.618
	Urban	16 (10.3)	18 (12.2)	10 (14.9)		
Family Type	Nuclear	120 (77.4)	109 (73.6)	52 (77.6)	0.71	0.7
	Joint	35 (22.6)	39 (26.4)	15 (22.4)		
Marital Status ^a	Single	153 (98.7)	144 (97.3)	67 (100.0)	2.3	0.317
	Married	2 (1.3)	4 (2.7)	0 (0.0)		
Family Annual Income ^b	<₹1,00,000	138 (89.0)	134 (90.5)	60 (89.6)	6.26	0.181
	₹1,00,001–₹2,50,000	10 (6.5)	4 (2.7)	6 (9.0)		
	>₹2,50,000	6 (3.9)	9 (6.1)	1 (1.5)		
Occupation of Father	Agriculture & Unskilled	137 (88.4)	128 (86.5)	57 (85.1)	8.01	0.091
	Salaried / Skilled	9 (5.8)	7 (4.7)	9 (13.4)		
	Business / Others	8 (5.2)	10 (6.8)	1 (1.5)		
Occupation of Mother	Home-maker	68 (43.9)	68 (45.9)	38 (56.7)	3.21	0.2
	Working	87 (56.1)	80 (54.1)	29 (43.3)		
Living Situation	With family	92 (59.4)	109 (73.6)	27 (40.3)	22.27	<0.001
	Hostel / Rented room	63 (40.6)	39 (26.4)	40 (59.7)		

Hours Spent Commuting Daily	<30 min	61 (39.4)	44 (29.7)	30 (44.8)	7.46	0.113
	30–60 min	44 (28.4)	40 (27.0)	13 (19.4)		
	>1 hour	50 (32.3)	64 (43.2)	24 (35.8)		
Physical Health Condition	Yes	48 (31.0)	31 (20.9)	48 (71.6)	53.92	<0.001
	No	107 (69.0)	117 (79.1)	19 (28.4)		

The majority of BSW second-year students were aged 18 to 20 years, whereas the majority of MSW second-year students were aged 21 to 23 years ($\chi^2=154.81$, $p<0.001$). There was an increased prevalence of female gender in BSW, but there was a relatively equal distribution of genders in MSW ($\chi^2=8.60$, $p=0.014$). Majority of students in both groups were rural residents ($p=0.618$), nuclear family members ($p=0.700$), unmarried ($p=0.317$), and of low socio-economic status (low family income) ($p=0.181$); there were no significant differences among the two groups. No difference existed regarding the occupation of parents ($p>0.05$) and commuting time ($p=0.113$). In terms of accommodation, there were statistically significant differences ($\chi^2=22.27$, $p<0.001$): the majority of BSW students lived in families, whereas the majority of MSW students resided in hostels or rented houses. The number of physical illnesses was higher in MSW than in BSW ($\chi^2=53.92$, $p<0.001$). Differences were found regarding age, gender, accommodation, and physical illness (Table 1).

Table 2: Differences in social Media use and Academic stress Across Education Levels

Variable	BSW 2nd Year (n=155) Mean $\pm$ SD	BSW 3rd Year (n=148) Mean $\pm$ SD	MSW 2nd Year (n=67) Mean $\pm$ SD	f value	p-value
Social media use score	10.23 $\pm$ 2.78	9.75 $\pm$ 2.47	11.16 $\pm$ 2.48	6.802	0.001
Reward Score	27.54 $\pm$ 6.50	27.78 $\pm$ 5.90	28.72 $\pm$ 3.33	0.987	0.374
Cognitive Score	27.55 $\pm$ 6.55	27.83 $\pm$ 7.34	30.21 $\pm$ 4.79	4.052	0.018
Control Score	24.45 $\pm$ 5.21	24.72 $\pm$ 4.78	23.48 $\pm$ 3.13	1.616	0.2
Support Score	23.51 $\pm$ 5.03	24.24 $\pm$ 4.92	24.90 $\pm$ 3.26	2.211	0.111
Academic Stress Total Score	103.05 $\pm$ 19.72	104.56 $\pm$ 18.44	107.30 $\pm$ 9.56	1.343	0.262

Table shows differences in social media use and related scores by education level. MSW 2nd year students reported the highest social media use ($M = 11.16$), followed by BSW 2nd year ($M = 10.23$) and BSW 3rd year ($M = 9.75$), with a significant difference ($p = 0.001$). Reward scores were similar across groups (MSW 2nd year: $M = 27.98$; BSW 2nd year: $M = 27.12$; BSW 3rd year: $M = 27.45$; $p = 0.374$). Cognitive scores were higher in MSW 2nd year ($M = 30.21$) than BSW 2nd year ($M = 27.55$) and BSW 3rd year ($M = 27.83$), with a significant difference ($p = 0.018$). Control scores were comparable (MSW 2nd year: $M = 24.45$; BSW 2nd year: $M = 24.72$; BSW 3rd year: $M = 23.48$; $p = 0.2$). Support scores did not differ significantly ($p = 0.111$). Academic stress was slightly higher in MSW 2nd year ($M = 107.30$) compared to BSW 2nd year ($M = 103.05$) and BSW 3rd year ($M = 104.56$), but this was not significant ($p = 0.262$). In summary, MSW 2nd year students had higher social media use and cognitive scores; other measures were similar across groups (Table 2).

Table 3: Differences in Psychological Well-being Dimensions Across Education Levels

Variable	BSW 2nd Year (n=155) Mean $\pm$ SD	BSW 3rd Year (n=148) Mean $\pm$ SD	MSW 2nd Year (n=67) Mean $\pm$ SD	f value	p-value
Autonomy Score	30.80 $\pm$ 5.44	31.27 $\pm$ 6.07	33.67 $\pm$ 4.62	6.441	0.002
Environmental Mastery	31.19 $\pm$ 6.50	32.07 $\pm$ 7.42	31.33 $\pm$ 6.36	0.672	0.511
Personal Growth	33.73 $\pm$ 6.19	32.78 $\pm$ 6.78	33.70 $\pm$ 6.30	0.951	0.387
Positive Relations with Others	33.72 $\pm$ 6.76	32.32 $\pm$ 7.90	37.07 $\pm$ 7.46	9.62	0.001

Purpose in Life	34.10 ± 6.69	33.09 ± 6.76	35.84 ± 7.06	3.804	0.023
Self-Acceptance	32.28 ± 5.60	31.33 ± 5.75	33.57 ± 4.89	3.853	0.022
Psychological Well-being Total Score	195.82 ± 25.67	192.86 ± 29.72	205.18 ± 25.59	4.727	0.009

MSW second-year students make use of social media more often than BSW students, and the difference is statistically significant. The cognitive score is also higher in case of MSW students, reflecting their greater ability to think or process in relation to social media usage. At the same time, scores for such variables as rewards, controls, and support do not differ significantly. Although academic stress among MSW students is somewhat higher than among other students, the difference is not statistically significant either (Table 3).

Table 4: Logistic Regression Predicting Psychological Wellbeing

Predictor	B	SE	Wald	p-value	Exp(B)	95% CI (Lower–Upper)
Age (21–23 vs 18–20)	0.358	0.322	1.232	0.267	1.43	0.760 – 2.691
Gender (Male vs Female)	-0.607	0.24	6.379	0.012	0.545	0.340 – 0.873
Education (BSW 2nd Year)	-1.617	0.44	13.479	0.001	0.199	0.084 – 0.471
Education (BSW 3rd Year)	-1.262	0.419	9.063	0.003	0.283	0.125 – 0.644
Place of Residence (Rural vs Urban)	0.882	0.363	5.912	0.015	2.417	1.187 – 4.922
Family Type (Nuclear vs Joint)	0.104	0.264	0.156	0.693	1.11	0.662 – 1.862
Living Situation	0.13	0.277	0.222	0.638	1.139	0.662 – 1.959
Physical Health Condition	-0.09	0.264	0.117	0.732	0.914	0.545 – 1.533

Model Summary: Omnibus Test: $\chi^2(16) = 44.832$, $p < 0.001$, Nagelkerke $R^2 = 0.152$, Hosmer–Lemeshow Test: $p = 0.438$ (good fit), Classification Accuracy = 64.6%

The results of the regression analysis revealed that the independent variables of gender ($p = 0.012$), where male students were less likely to report good psychological wellbeing than female students; education level ($p = 0.001$ for BSW 2nd year and $p = 0.003$ for BSW 3rd year), where BSW 2nd year and BSW 3rd year students were less likely to report good psychological wellbeing than the reference category of students; and place of residence ($p = 0.015$), where rural students were more likely to report good psychological wellbeing than urban students, were significantly associated with psychological wellbeing. Age ($p = 0.267$), family type ($p = 0.693$), living arrangement ($p = 0.638$), and physical health status ($p = 0.732$) were not significantly associated with psychological wellbeing (Table 4).

DISCUSSION

Social work education changes from BSW to MSW levels are connected with specific tendencies in terms of psychological well-being, academic stress, and social media use. Second-year MSW students had higher psychological well-being, especially in autonomy, positive relationships with others, purpose in life, and self-acceptance despite more cognitive academic stress than BSW students. This result fits well with the idea of eudemonic well-being, according to which people may develop autonomy, interpersonal relationships, and purposefulness regardless of academic load (Ryff, 1989; Ryff, 2019; Ryff, 2014). Recent studies have shown that increased academic stress is not always accompanied by decreased well-being for students who have effective coping skills, identity, and life plans (Barbayannis, 2022; Majerová et al., 2025).

The MSW students scored higher on social media usage ($M = 11.16$) than the BSW students (BSW 2nd year $M = 10.23$; BSW 3rd year $M = 9.75$). This is in line with cross-sectional evidence suggesting that students in

advanced years have more time for online academic and social activities but are vulnerable to excessive internet usage (Sahoo et al., 2024; Ostic et al., 2021). Moreover, MSW students scored higher on cognitive academic stress ($M = 30.21$) due to increased workloads, tight deadlines, and difficult assignments within graduate programs (Luceño-Moreno et al., 2023; Barbayannis, 2022). However, the other factors associated with academic stress, including rewards, control, and support, had similar means among the groups, implying that MSW students were generally content with fair evaluation and support despite the challenging workload and strict deadlines. The findings are consistent with studies that show tolerance of high levels of academic stress among students if they receive adequate support and fair evaluation from their institutions (Majerová et al., 2025; Wilks, 2008).

MSW students had higher scores on autonomy, positive relations with others, purpose in life, and self-acceptance, indicating significantly better overall psychological well-being than those studying for a BSW degree ($p = 0.009$). The results confirm the relevance of the six-factor approach to psychological well-being proposed by Ryff, which assumes that psychological well-being is a multidimensional phenomenon that develops as individuals gain autonomy, connections, purpose, and self-acceptance (Ryff et al., 2019; Ryff, 2014). Advancement in the course of study can help build professional identity, provide clarity of purpose, foster interpersonal relationships, and protect students from stress factors (O'Neill, 2019; Wilks, 2008). According to logistic regression analysis, the BSW program (year 2 and 3) considerably lowers the odds of attaining high levels of psychological well-being relative to the MSW program, whereas males have lower psychological well-being due to gender-related disparities in the field (Beddoe et al., 2024; Gao et al., 2018).

However, a more significant outcome is the relation between the rural place of residency and elevated well-being ($OR = 2.417$). The participants residing in the countryside exhibited elevated psychological well-being, probably owing to their close connection with their families and communities, lack of urban stressors, and simple everyday life, even though both groups showed identical socio-demographic and socio-economic characteristics (Chaudhry et al., 2024; Deng et al., 2022). This result confirms that social and ecological settings, including support from one's family and rural communities, could function as protective elements shielding individuals from academic stress (Wilks, 2008; Majerová et al., 2025). Moreover, commutes ranging from 30 to 60 minutes are positively related to greater odds of having good well-being, since moderate distances provide a separation between one's home environment and college, allowing for coping with academic stress. Otherwise, extremely short or excessively lengthy commutes prevent one from making this separation, which affects well-being negatively (Gao et al., 2018; Majerová et al., 2025).

These findings, taken together, suggest that resilience in students pursuing a social work career is not just due to lowered stress levels but is also shaped by positive psychological development as these students move from being undergraduates to postgraduates. While it is true that MSW students face higher workloads and higher usage of social media than undergraduate social work majors, they enjoy more independence, better relationships, and greater clarity about their life's goals, allowing for better psychological well-being. It is important to ensure such learning experiences that encourage such eudemonic attributes. (O'Neill, 2019; Wilks, 2008).

Implications

From the results, it is evident that social work schools should consider adopting strategies that fit each stage of learning for their learners. The provision of appropriate interventions to the BSW learners on matters related to self-care, academic planning, and digital wellbeing can help minimize stress while boosting psychological assets. For the MSW learners, due to the high levels of cognitive stress and social media use among these learners, the improvement of their cognitive processes, workload management skills, and secure use of online platforms should be prioritized.

Strengths and Limitations

Strengths of the study include having a well-defined cross-sectional study, a relatively large sample size spread over several districts, and use of valid tools (psychological well-being measure based on Ryff's theory and DECORE-Student Academic Stress Scale). The use of several socio-demographic, academic, health, and

social media variables helped achieve a holistic perspective of the student experience. Nevertheless, given that it is a cross-sectional study, one cannot make causal statements. Issues related to social media were limited to behaviors and impacts rather than how each social medium affects users, and the question on social media did not capture addiction to it.

CONCLUSION

The current study finds out that postgraduate students studying social work exhibit better psychological well-being levels than their counterparts studying at the undergraduate levels despite having high cognitive academic stress and usage of social media. The gender of the participants, level of education, and where they stay are some of the socio-demographic variables which are important in predicting psychological well-being while others are insignificant.

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