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Sense of Belonging, Serenity, and Psychological Flourishing among University Students

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ABSTRACT

University students face intense academic, social, and developmental demands, making psychological flourishing a key indicator of student well-being. The present study examined the relationship between sense of belonging, serenity, and flourishing among university students, tested the predictive roles of belonging and serenity, and explored gender differences. A quantitative correlational design was used with a convenience sample of 101 students (43 males, 58 females) aged 18–30 years from public and private universities. Participants completed the Sense of Belonging Scale (Hagerty & Patusky, 1995), the Brief Serenity Scale (Kreitzer et al., 2009), and the Flourishing Scale (Diener et al., 2010). Reliability was acceptable to excellent (α = .767 to .961). Pearson correlations showed that flourishing was positively related to sense of belonging (r = .320, $p < .01$) and strongly related to serenity (r = .642, $p < .01$). Multiple regression indicated that belonging and serenity together explained 44% of the variance in flourishing, $F(2, 98) = 38.53$, $p < .001$, with serenity the stronger predictor (β = .600, $p < .001$) and belonging a smaller but significant unique predictor (β = .172, p = .029). Independent samples t-tests revealed no statistically significant gender differences in belonging, serenity, or flourishing. The findings suggest that inner peace and social connectedness are complementary resources for student flourishing, and that university counselling and wellness programs may benefit from targeting both.

1. Introduction

University life is a period of significant transition. Students move through academic pressure, new peer environments, identity formation, and uncertainty about the future, often during what has been described as emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000). These pressures make student mental health a growing concern worldwide. Contemporary psychology, however, increasingly defines mental health as more than the absence of illness. Keyes (2002, 2007) proposed that complete mental health involves the presence of positive functioning, a state he termed flourishing, while Seligman (2011) described flourishing as the broader aim of positive psychology. Flourishing reflects the perception that one's life is going well, including meaningful relationships, a sense of purpose, self-esteem, competence, and optimism (Diener et al., 2010).

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Identifying the psychological resources that promote flourishing in students is therefore of both theoretical and practical importance. The promising candidates are sense of belonging, a social-relational resource, and serenity, an inner, emotional-spiritual resource. The present study examines how each relates to flourishing and how well they jointly predict it.

1.1 Sense of Belonging

The need to belong is regarded as a fundamental human motivation (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Hagerty and Patusky (1995) defined sense of belonging as the experience of personal involvement in a system or environment so that persons feel themselves to be an integral part of that system. Several theoretical traditions place belonging at the centre of well-being. Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs positions love and belongingness as a prerequisite for esteem and self-actualization. Self-determination theory identifies relatedness as one of three basic psychological needs whose satisfaction supports growth and well-being (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2001). Social identity theory explains how identification with a group contributes to self-concept and positive self-evaluation (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

Empirical evidence is consistent with these accounts. Belonging has been linked to lower psychological distress and better social and psychological functioning (Hagerty et al., 1996), and to academic motivation, engagement, and mental health in educational settings (Allen et al., 2018; Walton & Cohen, 2007). In higher education, students who feel accepted, valued, and included are better placed to cope with stressors and to thrive (Allen et al., 2021).

1.2 Serenity

Serenity refers to a disposition of inner peace, emotional stability, and acceptance, in which a person remains calm and composed despite external difficulties (Roberts & Aspy, 1993). Kreitzer et al. (2009) conceptualized serenity as a core component of well-being involving acceptance, inner haven, and trust. Serenity is related to, but distinct from, general positive affect, because it concerns a stable internal sense of calm rather than momentary pleasant feelings. Calm and acceptance may allow individuals to regulate emotion, make sense of adversity, and sustain engagement with valued goals. This is consistent with the broaden-and-build account, in which positive and settled emotional states widen cognitive and behavioural repertoires and build lasting personal resources (Fredrickson, 2001). Compared with belonging, serenity has received limited attention in student populations, particularly in South Asian contexts, which makes it a valuable addition to the study of flourishing.

1.3 Flourishing

Flourishing draws on two long-standing views of well-being: the hedonic view, which emphasises feeling good, and the eudaimonic view, which emphasises functioning well and living meaningfully (Ryan & Deci, 2001). Keyes (2002) defined flourishing as a state of complete mental health in which a person reports high emotional, psychological, and social well-being, in contrast to languishing, and later argued that mental health is the presence of positive functioning and not merely the absence of mental illness (Keyes, 2007). Ryff (1989) described psychological well-being through six dimensions: self-acceptance, positive relations with others, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life, and personal growth. Seligman (2011) similarly framed flourishing as the combination of positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment. Diener et al. (2010) condensed these ideas into the brief, 8-item Flourishing Scale, which captures self-perceived success in relationships, self-esteem, purpose, and optimism, and which is the measure used in this study.

Flourishing is especially relevant in higher education. Students who flourish tend to show more adaptive achievement-related outcomes (Howell, 2009), and students with higher levels of positive mental health are less likely to experience academic impairment (Keyes et al., 2012). Flourishing has also been studied across countries and age groups, and its levels differ across cultural and demographic contexts (Huppert & So, 2013), which highlights the need for evidence from varied student populations, including those in South Asia. Understanding which psychological resources are associated with flourishing can therefore help universities design programs that promote positive functioning and not only reduce distress.

1.4 Belonging, Serenity, and Flourishing

Belonging provides external, relational support, whereas serenity represents an internal regulatory resource. Both should plausibly contribute to flourishing, and they may do so independently. Belonging satisfies relatedness and the need for acceptance, while serenity buffers stress and supports a positive appraisal of life. Few studies have examined the two together as predictors of flourishing in university students. Examining them jointly allows an estimate of the unique contribution of each. Gender is also a frequently studied demographic variable in student well-being, but findings are mixed, and further evidence from varied cultural settings is needed (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

1.5 Rationale of the Study

University students go through a demanding developmental period marked by academic pressure, social adjustment, and uncertainty about the future (Arnett, 2000). Student mental health is increasingly understood as the presence of positive functioning, not just the absence of distress (Keyes, 2007), and flourishing is linked to better academic and psychological outcomes (Howell, 2009; Keyes et al., 2012). Universities therefore need to know which psychological resources are most closely associated with flourishing. Previous research has examined sense of belonging extensively as a social-relational resource grounded in basic psychological needs (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Allen et al., 2021). Serenity, an inner resource reflecting calm, acceptance, and emotional stability (Roberts & Aspy, 1993; Kreitzer et al., 2009), has received far less attention in student samples. Few studies appear to have examined belonging and serenity together as predictors of flourishing, so the unique contribution of each, once the other is controlled, remains unclear. Testing both in a single model addresses this gap and indicates whether social connectedness and inner peace operate as complementary resources.

Evidence on gender differences in student well-being is also inconsistent (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005), and most psychological research is based on Western samples (Henrich et al., 2010). Data from university students in Pakistan therefore add to the cross-cultural evidence base. The study is also practically important. Its findings can guide university counselling centres and wellness programmes in deciding whether to prioritize social integration, emotional and spiritual coping skills, or both. Identifying serenity as a possible target for intervention is useful because inner calm can be developed through trainable practices, which are consistent with the broaden-and-build account of positive emotions (Fredrickson, 2001). The present study therefore examines the relationships among sense of belonging, serenity, and flourishing, the predictive role of belonging and serenity, and gender differences among university students.

1.6 Objectives

The study aimed

(a) To assess the levels of flourishing, sense of belonging, and serenity among university students

(b) To investigate the relationship between sense of belonging and flourishing

(c) To examine the relationship between serenity and flourishing

(d) To determine the predictive role of sense of belonging and serenity on flourishing

(e) To identify potential gender differences in these variables

1.7 Hypotheses

H1: There will be a significant positive relationship between sense of belonging and flourishing.

H2: There will be a significant positive relationship between serenity and flourishing.

H3: Sense of belonging and serenity will be significant positive predictors of flourishing.

H4: There will be significant gender differences in flourishing, sense of belonging, and serenity among university students.

2. Method

2.1 Research Design

A quantitative correlational design was used to examine the relationships among sense of belonging, serenity, and flourishing, and the predictive strength of the first two for the third, without experimental manipulation (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Field, 2018). Sense of belonging and serenity were the independent (predictor) variables, and flourishing was the dependent variable.

2.2 Participants

The sample comprised 101 university students enrolled in public and private sector higher education institutions, of whom 43 (42.6%) were male and 58 (57.4%) were female. Participants were aged 18 to 30 years, the typical range for undergraduate and postgraduate students. A convenience sampling technique was used because of accessibility and time constraints (Bryman, 2016). Participation was voluntary.

2.3 Instruments

2.3.1Sense of Belonging Scale (SOBS)

Sense of belonging was measured using the 16-item Sense of Belonging Scale developed by Mellinger et al. (2023). The scale assesses respondents' general feeling of belonging and can be adapted to different contexts; in this study, it was used in its original form without adaptation. The scale was administered in English. Respondents indicate their level of agreement with each statement on a 5-point Likert scale. The scale contains no reverse-scored item. In the present sample, the scale showed acceptable internal consistency (Cronbach's α = .767).

2.3.2Brief Serenity Scale (BSS)

Serenity was measured using the 22-item Brief Serenity Scale (Kreitzer et al., 2009), a shortened version of the Serenity Scale (Roberts & Aspy, 1993). The scale assesses inner peace and emotional stability through three facets: acceptance, inner haven, and trust. Respondents rate how often each statement applies to them on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (always). The scale contains no reverse-scored items, and total scores were calculated by summing all items (possible range = 22–110), with higher scores indicating greater serenity. The scale was administered in English. In the present sample, it showed excellent internal consistency (Cronbach's α = .961).

2.3.3Flourishing Scale (FS)

Psychological flourishing was measured using the 8-item Flourishing Scale (Diener et al., 2010), which assesses self-perceived success in important areas of life, including relationships, self-esteem, purpose, and optimism. Respondents rate their agreement with each statement on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). All items are positively worded and none are reverse-scored. Total scores were calculated by summing all items (possible range = 8–56), with higher scores indicating greater psychological well-being. The scale was administered in English. In the present sample, it showed excellent internal consistency (Cronbach's α = .960).

2.4 Procedure and Ethical Considerations

Data were collected through Google Forms and printed questionnaires, depending on access to each campus. Participants were informed about the aims and academic nature of the study before taking part, and informed consent was obtained from each student. Participation was voluntary, participants could withdraw at any time, and anonymity and confidentiality were assured. No personal identifiers were recorded, and data were used for academic research purposes only, in line with the American Psychological Association (2020) ethical standards and the Declaration of Helsinki (World Medical Association, 2013).

2.5 Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations) summarized the sample. Cronbach's alpha (Cronbach, 1951) assessed internal consistency. Pearson product-moment correlations examined the associations among variables. Multiple linear regression tested the joint and unique predictive effects of sense of belonging and serenity on flourishing (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2019). Independent samples t-tests examined gender differences (Pallant, 2020). The significance level was set at α = .05. Cohen's (1988) guidelines were used to interpret effect sizes.

3. Results

3.1 Sample Characteristics and Reliability

Table 1 :Frequency and Percentage Distribution of Gender (N = 101)

Gender	F	%
Male	43	42.6
Female	58	57.4
Total	101	100.0

Table 1 shows that the sample comprised 101 university students, of whom 58 (57.4%) were female and 43 (42.6%) were male. Both genders were represented, with females forming a slightly larger share of the sample.

Table 2 :Cronbach's Alpha Reliability Coefficients (N = 101)

Scale	Items	α	Internal consistency
Sense of Belonging Scale (SOBS)	16	.767	Acceptable
Brief Serenity Scale (BSS)	22	.961	Excellent
Flourishing Scale (FS)	8	.960	Excellent

As shown in Table 2, the Brief Serenity Scale (α = .961) and the Flourishing Scale (α = .960) had alpha values above .90, indicating excellent internal consistency. The Sense of Belonging Scale (α = .767) exceeded the commonly used threshold of .70 (Pallant, 2020), indicating acceptable reliability. All three scales were therefore sufficiently reliable for the correlation, regression, and t-test analyses that followed**.**

3.2 Correlation Analysis

Table 3: *I*nter-Correlation Matrix of Sense of Belonging, Serenity, and Flourishing (N = 101)

Variable	1	2	3
1. Sense of Belonging (SOBS)	—	.246*	.320**
2. Serenity (BSS)		—	.642**
3. Flourishing (FS)			—

Note. *p < .05, **p < .01

Table 3 presents the inter-correlations. Sense of belonging was significantly and positively correlated with flourishing (r = .320, p < .01), a small-to-moderate association that supports H1. Serenity was strongly and positively correlated with flourishing (r = .642, p < .01), supporting H2. Belonging and serenity were weakly but significantly related (r = .246, p < .05).

3.3 Multiple Regression Analysis

Table 4: Multiple Regression Predicting Flourishing (N = 101)

Predictor	B	SE	β	T	p
(Constant)	−9.164	6.148	—	−1.490	.139
Sense of Belonging	0.254	0.115	.172	2.214	.029
Serenity	0.414	0.054	.600	7.689	< .001

Note. R^2 = .440; adjusted R^2 = .429; F(2, 98) = 38.53, p < .001.

Multiple linear regression was conducted with sense of belonging and serenity as predictors and flourishing as the criterion (Table 4). The overall model was significant, F(2, 98) = 38.53, p < .001, and explained 44.0% of the variance in flourishing (R^2 = .440, adjusted R^2 = .429), which corresponds to a large effect (Cohen, 1988). Serenity was the strongest predictor (β = .600, t = 7.689, p < .001). Sense of belonging made a smaller but significant unique contribution (β = .172, t = 2.214, p = .029). The low correlation between the predictors (r = .246) indicates that multicollinearity was not a concern. These results support H3.

3.4 Gender Differences

Table 5: Gender Differences in Sense of Belonging, Serenity, and Flourishing (N = 101)

Variable	Male (n = 43) M ± SD	Female (n = 58) M ± SD	t	df	p
Sense of Belonging	50.79 ± 9.19	49.79 ± 10.71	0.491	99	.624
Serenity	72.95 ± 23.89	66.50 ± 19.24	1.503	99	.136

Variable	Male (n = 43) M ± SD	Female (n = 58) M ± SD	t	df	p
Flourishing	35.42 ± 15.28	29.88 ± 14.12	1.882	99	.063

Independent samples t-tests compared male and female students (Table 5). No significant differences emerged for sense of belonging, $t(99) = 0.491$, $p = .624$, serenity, $t(99) = 1.503$, $p = .136$, or flourishing, $t(99) = 1.882$, $p = .063$. Male students scored somewhat higher on serenity and flourishing, but the effects were small (Cohen's $d \approx 0.30$ and 0.38, respectively) and did not reach significance at the .05 level. Thus, H4 was not supported.

4. Discussion

This study examined how sense of belonging and serenity relate to, and predict, flourishing among university students. Three main findings emerged. Both variables were positively related to flourishing, serenity was the stronger correlate and predictor, and no significant gender differences were found.

The positive association between belonging and flourishing (H1) is consistent with theories that treat belonging as a basic human need (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Maslow, 1943) and with self-determination theory, in which relatedness supports optimal functioning (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Students who feel accepted and valued in their university environment are likely to find it easier to form supportive relationships, feel competent, and experience life as meaningful. The correlation was modest ($r = .320$, about 10% shared variance), which suggests that belonging is only one of several contributors to flourishing. This is in line with prior findings that belonging is associated with positive student outcomes but is not sufficient on its own (Allen et al., 2018, 2021).

The strong association between serenity and flourishing (H2) is the most notable result ($r = .642$, about 41% shared variance). Serenity reflects acceptance, emotional steadiness, and inner calm, qualities likely to support emotion regulation, coping with academic stress, and positive appraisal of one's life. This pattern fits the broaden-and-build account, in which settled positive states build enduring personal resources (Fredrickson, 2001), and it is also compatible with the view that eudaimonic well-being is supported by self-acceptance and psychological balance (Ryan & Deci, 2001). Part of the strength of the association may also reflect conceptual overlap between serenity and well-being measures, since both capture internal positive states. This possibility should be considered when interpreting the effect.

The regression results (H3) show that the two predictors together explained 44% of the variance in flourishing. Serenity contributed most strongly, but belonging retained a significant unique effect after serenity was controlled. This suggests that belonging and serenity are complementary and partly independent resources: one social and external, the other internal and regulatory. The small correlation between them ($r = .246$) supports this interpretation. Practically, it implies that interventions focusing only on social integration, or only on stress reduction and calm, may each capture only part of what supports student flourishing.

Contrary to H4, no significant gender differences were found for any variable. Male students scored slightly higher on serenity and flourishing, and the flourishing difference approached significance ($p = .063$), but the effect sizes were small and the study may have been underpowered to detect them with 43 males and 58 females. The findings are consistent with the view that students of both genders, sharing the same academic environment and developmental demands, report comparable levels of belonging, serenity, and flourishing (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). The near-significant trend should be examined in larger samples before firm conclusions are drawn.

4.1 Implications

The results have several implications for university practice. Counselling centers and wellness programs could combine strategies that build social connectedness, such as peer mentoring, orientation programs, student societies, and inclusive classroom practices, with approaches that cultivate inner calm and acceptance, such as mindfulness, acceptance-based training, and stress-management workshops. Because serenity was the strongest predictor, building emotional and spiritual coping skills deserves particular attention. Universities may also monitor belonging and serenity as early indicators of student well-being.

4.2 Limitations and Future Directions

Several limitations should be noted. First, the cross-sectional correlational design does not permit causal conclusions, and the direction of effects cannot be established. Flourishing may, for example, also enhance feelings of belonging and calm. Second, the sample was small ($N = 101$) and obtained through convenience sampling, which limits generalizability and statistical power, and the participants came from a limited cultural context (Henrich et al., 2010). Third, all variables were measured using self-report scales at a single time point, which raises the possibility of common method bias and social desirability effects (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Fourth, institutional type, academic year, and other demographic factors were not analyzed. Future research

should use larger and more representative samples, longitudinal or experimental designs, and additional variables such as academic stress, social support, and mindfulness. Future studies could also test whether serenity mediates the relationship between belonging and flourishing, using appropriate mediation procedures (Hayes, 2022).

5. Conclusion

Sense of belonging and serenity were both positively associated with flourishing among university students, and together they accounted for 44% of its variance, with serenity the stronger predictor. No significant gender differences were found. These findings indicate that student flourishing is supported by both social connectedness and inner peace, and they point to the value of integrated university programs that address both resources.

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