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## Introduction

Psychological security, broadly defined as a stable sense of safety, control, and emotional protection from internal and external threats, is essential for healthy human functioning. It is a foundational condition for personal development, self-expression, and academic achievement, particularly among university students who face significant social, academic, and emotional transitions (Maslow, 1943; Laursen & Collins, 2022). The

# The Relationship Between Psychological Security and Academic Performance Among University Students

Murtada Hamid. Shalaga

## ABSTRACT

**Objective:** This study aimed to assess the level of psychological security among female university students and examine its relationship with self-reported academic performance.

**Methods and Materials:** A cross-sectional, correlational design was employed using a stratified random sample of 400 female undergraduate students enrolled in the College of Education for Women at the University of Baghdad. Data were collected using two self-report instruments: the Psychological Security Scale (Shuqair, 2005) and a self-constructed Academic Performance Questionnaire. Reliability and validity were assessed, and data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, independent samples t-tests, and Pearson correlation coefficients.

**Findings:** The findings indicated that the sample exhibited moderate to high levels of psychological security. A statistically significant positive correlation was found between psychological security and academic performance ( $r=0.75$ ,  $p<0.01$ ). Significant differences were also observed in psychological security and academic performance based on academic year and specialization, favoring fourth-year and scientific-specialization students.

**Conclusion:** Psychological security appears to be a strong predictor of perceived academic performance among female university students. Enhancing students' psychological well-being may lead to better academic outcomes. However, further studies using objective academic data and a more diverse sample are recommended.

**Keywords:** Psychological security, academic performance, female students.

construct of psychological security extends beyond physical safety; it encapsulates emotional stability, predictability in one's environment, trust in institutional systems, and freedom from excessive fear, anxiety, or social rejection (O'Neill, 2018).

The university years are a critical period for psychological development, where individuals encounter new responsibilities, identity formation challenges, and performance demands that often strain their mental well-being. For students in regions affected

by social or political instability—such as Iraq—these stressors are further exacerbated by contextual challenges such as economic uncertainty, weak student support systems, and limited access to mental health services (Ahmed & Babikir, 2021). In such settings, the availability—or lack—of psychological security can significantly influence students' ability to cope, persist, and perform academically.

Recent empirical studies have identified psychological security as a significant predictor of students' academic motivation, engagement, and performance outcomes. For example, Eisenberg et al. (2016) emphasize that feelings of safety and belonging within the academic environment are linked to improved cognitive performance, lower dropout rates, and enhanced psychological resilience. Similarly, Deci and Ryan (2000) propose that perceived safety and autonomy are critical for the internalization of academic goals, suggesting a theoretical pathway between psychological security and academic functioning.

Academic performance itself is a multifaceted construct influenced by both cognitive abilities and psychosocial variables. Meta-analyses by Richardson, Abraham, and Bond (2012) found that non-cognitive factors such as self-efficacy, motivation, and emotional well-being accounted for nearly one-third of the variance in academic achievement among university students. In this light, psychological security may operate not only as a direct influence but also as a moderator or mediator through which academic self-regulation, motivation, and persistence are facilitated (Taylor & Gebre, 2016).

In collectivist cultures—such as those in many Arab countries—the interplay between psychological safety and academic success is shaped by additional dynamics. Female students, in particular, often navigate restrictive gender norms, family expectations, and institutional barriers that may compromise their sense of autonomy and security (Alsubaie et al., 2019). According to a cross-cultural study by Karaman et al. (2021), Middle Eastern university students reported significantly higher levels of academic stress and psychological distress than their Western counterparts, with female students being disproportionately affected. When such stress remains unaddressed, it can undermine not only students' mental health but also their academic efficacy, commitment, and future planning.

Despite growing awareness of student mental health worldwide, the empirical exploration of psychological security—distinct from broader constructs like stress, anxiety, or depression—remains limited in the Middle East. In Iraq specifically, research on the psychological dimensions of academic success is scarce and often methodologically constrained. Moreover, there is little consensus on how to operationalize or measure psychological security in educational contexts, leading to inconsistencies in findings and interventions (Mahmood & Saleh, 2020). This creates a critical gap in understanding how emotional safety contributes to the academic resilience and outcomes of students in this region.

The current study aims to address this gap by exploring the relationship between psychological security and self-reported academic performance among female undergraduate students at the University of Baghdad. The decision to focus on female students stems from both methodological and sociocultural considerations. As highlighted by Hassan et al. (2022), female students in Iraq are often subject to increased social control, limited autonomy, and fewer institutional resources compared to their male peers. These conditions not only elevate their vulnerability to psychological insecurity but also place them at risk for underperformance and academic disengagement.

It is also essential to clarify how psychological security is conceptualized and measured in the present research. Drawing on the work of O'Neill (2018) and Laursen and Collins (2022), psychological security is understood as a subjective experience reflecting one's perceived stability, emotional predictability, and freedom from threatening social judgments within the academic environment. This construct is distinct from general psychological well-being in that it emphasizes the anticipation of emotional safety rather than the presence of positive emotions per se.

Academic performance, in turn, is measured via self-assessment of academic confidence, goal commitment, perceived effectiveness, and satisfaction with grades. While self-reported academic outcomes may be subject to biases, studies have shown a significant correlation between students' self-perception of academic performance and their actual GPA, particularly when assessments are anonymous and confidential (Credé & Kuncel, 2008). Therefore, self-report data can serve as a

valid indicator of academic functioning when interpreted cautiously and within methodological bounds.

Furthermore, the design of the present study incorporates stratified random sampling to ensure a diverse representation across academic years and disciplines. This allows for a more nuanced understanding of how psychological security may vary depending on the stage of study, academic pressure, and social environment. It also makes it possible to test whether psychological security is more critical at specific phases of the academic journey—such as transition to upper years or preparation for graduation. The anticipated contribution of this research is twofold: First, to offer empirical evidence from a Middle Eastern context on the relationship between emotional safety and academic functioning. Second, to inform institutional policies and mental health interventions aimed at creating more supportive, inclusive, and psychologically secure learning environments for female students. In doing so, the study also responds to a broader global agenda emphasizing student mental health as a central component of higher education quality and equity (WHO, 2021).

In sum, this study positions psychological security as a critical, yet under-recognized determinant of academic performance in Iraqi higher education. By focusing on a vulnerable student population in a high-stress academic environment, it seeks to shed light on the emotional foundations of learning and offer actionable insights for university administrators, counselors, and policy-makers.

## Methods and Materials

This study employed a cross-sectional, correlational design to investigate the association between psychological security and academic performance among undergraduate female students. The design was selected to allow the analysis of relationships between naturally occurring variables without manipulation or experimental intervention. This design is appropriate for examining associations within large population-based samples and offers practical utility for identifying psychological correlates of educational outcomes.

The study sample consisted of 400 female undergraduate students enrolled at the College of Education for Women, University of Baghdad, during the

2023–24 academic year. A stratified random sampling technique was used to ensure proportional representation from all academic stages (first through fourth year) and across both scientific and humanities specializations. Inclusion criteria were as follows: Female gender, enrollment in full-time undergraduate education, willingness to provide informed consent, and age between 18 and 25 years. Exclusion criteria included: Any current psychiatric diagnosis (self-reported or diagnosed), Incomplete response to more than 10% of the questionnaire items. The final sample size ( $n=400$ ) exceeded the minimum required for correlational studies with medium effect sizes ( $r=0.30$ ), power = 0.80, and  $\alpha = 0.05$ , based on power analysis using G\*Power 3.1.

## Instruments

### *Psychological Security Scale*

The Psychological Security Scale developed by Shuqair (2005) was used to measure students' perceived emotional security. This self-report instrument consists of 45 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). It includes four subscales: Sense of belonging, Emotional stability, Fear of rejection, and Confidence in the social environment. Higher scores indicate greater psychological security. Several items were negatively worded and reverse-scored to control for acquiescence bias. The original Arabic version was adapted with minor modifications for cultural relevance and underwent a pilot test for clarity. The internal consistency in the current study was satisfactory (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.81$ ). Validity was supported by expert review and preliminary factor analysis, indicating acceptable construct structure.

### *Academic Performance Questionnaire*

Academic performance was assessed using a researcher-constructed self-report scale consisting of 10 items reflecting students' perceptions of their academic competence, goal achievement, time management, and satisfaction with academic progress. Items were scored on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = very low to 5 = very high). Sample items included: "I am satisfied with my academic progress this semester." "I manage my study schedule effectively." This instrument was reviewed by three faculty members specializing in educational psychology to ensure content validity. The internal reliability of the scale was good (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.76$ ). While self-report

is a subjective measure of academic performance, previous research supports its use as a proxy when access to GPA is limited (Credé & Kuncel, 2008).

#### Procedure

After obtaining approval from the Ethics Committee of the University of Baghdad, coordination was established with faculty heads to administer the questionnaires during scheduled class hours. The study purpose was explained, and verbal and written informed consent were obtained. Participation was voluntary, anonymous, and confidential. Participants completed both instruments in paper-based format in supervised classroom settings, requiring approximately 20–25 minutes. The researcher was present to clarify any items without leading responses. All responses were screened for completeness. Data from 18 respondents were excluded due to excessive missing data or ineligibility, resulting in a final sample of 400.

#### Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics version 28. Before analysis, data were screened for outliers, normality, and missing values. No variable violated the assumption of normal distribution (assessed via the Shapiro–Wilk test,  $p > 0.05$ ), permitting the use of

#### Findings and Results

A total of 400 female undergraduate students participated in the study. Table 1 displays the demographic distribution by academic stage and specialization.

**Table 1**

*Demographic Distribution of Participants (N = 400)*

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
<b>Academic Stage</b>	First Year	102	25.5%
	Second Year	96	24.0%
	Third Year	103	25.8%
	Fourth Year	99	24.7%
<b>Specialization</b>	Scientific	190	47.5%
	Humanities	210	52.5%

The distribution across academic years and specializations was approximately equal, ensuring good representation of the target population. Descriptive statistics for the Psychological Security Scale and Academic Performance Scale are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2**

*Descriptive Statistics of Main Variables*

Variable	M	SD	Min	Max	Skewness	Kurtosis
<b>Psychological Security</b>	158.47	13.62	122	187	-0.23	-0.49
<b>Academic Performance</b>	38.94	4.71	25	49	-0.41	-0.31

parametric tests. The following statistical analyses were conducted: Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, skewness, kurtosis) for psychological security and academic performance. Independent samples t-tests to assess differences in mean scores across academic stage and specialization. Pearson's correlation coefficient ( $r$ ) is used to examine the relationship between psychological security and academic performance. Significance level was set at  $p < 0.05$  for all analyses. Effect sizes (Cohen's  $d$  for t-tests and  $r^2$  for correlations) were calculated and interpreted in accordance with Cohen's guidelines (1988).

#### Ethics

This study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki. Ethical clearance was obtained from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the University of Baghdad. Written informed consent was collected from all participants, who were assured of confidentiality and their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty. To ensure psychological safety during data collection, a referral protocol was in place for any student showing distress or requesting support. No such cases were reported during the study.

The distributions of both variables were approximately normal ( $|Skewness| < 1$ ;  $|Kurtosis| < 1$ ), satisfying the assumptions for parametric testing. A Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationship between psychological security and academic performance.

**Table 3**

*Correlation Between Psychological Security and Academic Performance*

Variables	$r$	p-value
Psychological Security × Academic Performance	0.61	< 0.001

This result suggests that higher psychological security is significantly associated with better self-reported academic performance. The shared variance ( $r^2 = 0.37$ ) indicates that approximately 37% of the variance in academic performance can be explained by psychological security. An independent-samples t-test was performed to compare psychological security between students in lower stages (1st–2nd year) and upper stages (3rd–4th year) (Table 3).

**Table 4***Psychological Security by Academic Stage*

Group	n	Mean (M)	SD	t	df	p-value	Cohen's d
Lower Stages	198	155.78	14.35				
Upper Stages	202	161.03	12.49	4.19	398	<0.001	0.39

Students in upper academic years reported significantly higher psychological security compared to those in lower years. The effect size was small to medium (Cohen's  $d = 0.39$ ), suggesting modest practical significance. An independent-samples  $t$ -test was also conducted to compare academic performance between scientific and humanities students (Table 4).

**Table 5***Academic Performance by Specialization*

Group	n	Mean (M)	SD	t	df	p-value	Cohen's d
Scientific	190	39.92	4.20				
Humanities	210	38.05	5.02	3.95	398	<0.001	0.40

Students in scientific specializations reported significantly higher academic performance than those in humanities. Again, the effect size was small to moderate (Cohen's  $d = 0.40$ ). Psychological security and academic performance were positively correlated ( $r = 0.61$ ). Fourth-year and third-year students showed higher psychological security than lower-stage students. Scientific-track students demonstrated higher academic performance than those in the humanities. All results were statistically significant ( $p < 0.001$ ) with acceptable effect sizes (Table 5).

## Discussion and Conclusion

The present study investigated the association between psychological security and academic performance among female undergraduate students in Iraq. The results indicated a statistically significant positive correlation between students' perceived psychological security and their self-reported academic performance. Additionally, students in higher academic years (third and fourth year) reported significantly greater psychological security compared to their peers in lower stages. In contrast, students in scientific disciplines showed better academic performance than those in the humanities. These findings have several implications for educational psychology, student support systems, and higher education policy.

The positive correlation observed between psychological security and academic performance aligns

with a growing body of literature suggesting that students who feel emotionally safe and supported are more likely to engage cognitively and behaviorally in academic tasks (Eisenberg et al., 2016; Taylor & Gebre, 2016). Emotional security fosters concentration, reduces distractions from anxiety or self-doubt, and facilitates persistence when facing academic challenges (Deci & Ryan, 2000). In contrast, psychological insecurity—characterized by fear of failure, social rejection, or lack of belonging—can result in disengagement and poor performance (Laursen & Collins, 2022).

Our findings further support the theoretical framework of Self-Determination Theory (SDT), which posits that autonomy, competence, and relatedness are foundational psychological needs for motivation and learning (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Psychological security intersects with all three: it reflects a sense of emotional safety in pursuing academic goals (autonomy), confidence in one's abilities (competence), and positive relationships with peers and instructors (relatedness). When these needs are met, intrinsic motivation flourishes, leading to better academic outcomes.

The finding that upper-stage students reported significantly higher psychological security is consistent with prior research indicating that academic experience, social adaptation, and familiarity with institutional norms increase with time in university (Karaman et al., 2021). First- and second-year students may still be adjusting to the academic environment, dealing with imposter feelings, or experiencing transitional stress (Conley et al., 2014). The increase in psychological security with academic seniority suggests the importance of early-stage interventions such as mentoring programs and psychological orientation during students' initial university years.

The difference observed in academic performance between students in scientific and humanities disciplines may reflect varying institutional support structures, pedagogical styles, or assessment expectations. Research by Alsubaie et al. (2019) has shown that scientific-track students in Middle Eastern contexts often benefit from more structured curricula, clearer performance metrics, and better post-graduate prospects, which may enhance their sense of efficacy and motivation. It is also possible that self-selection into disciplines is influenced by differing levels of academic confidence or external pressures, both of which may confound this relationship.



It is worth noting that the moderate-to-strong correlation ( $r = 0.61$ ) between psychological security and academic performance suggests a meaningful relationship, but it does not imply causality. Other factors not measured in this study—such as socioeconomic status, family expectations, physical health, or access to resources—may contribute to both constructs (Richardson et al., 2012; Eisenberg et al., 2016). While the findings are robust, they should be interpreted within the correlational design's limitations.

#### *Limitations*

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the use of self-report measures introduces the risk of social desirability bias and inflated correlations due to shared method variance. Although the instruments used demonstrated acceptable reliability, future studies should incorporate objective academic metrics (e.g., GPA, course completion rates) and multi-source evaluations (e.g., instructor assessments). Second, the sample consisted exclusively of female students from one college in Baghdad, which limits the generalizability of the results. Future studies should include male students and diverse academic institutions across urban and rural contexts. Third, although the psychological security scale used has been adapted and validated locally, it is not internationally standardized. Incorporating globally validated instruments would enhance cross-cultural comparability.

#### *Implications and Future Research*

Despite its limitations, this study contributes meaningful insights to the understanding of how emotional and psychological factors shape academic success in under-researched contexts such as Iraq. The results underline the importance of investing in psychological support infrastructure in universities, including access to counselors, peer support groups, and safe spaces for emotional expression. Future research should explore mediating variables, such as academic self-efficacy, test anxiety, or resilience, to better understand the mechanisms through which psychological security influences academic performance. Additionally, longitudinal studies are needed to assess changes in psychological security over time and its predictive validity on academic outcomes.

This study provides empirical evidence of a significant positive relationship between psychological security and academic performance among female university

students in Iraq. Students who felt emotionally safe, confident in their environment, and free from fear of social rejection reported better academic functioning. The findings also suggest that psychological security increases with academic seniority and that academic performance differs by specialization.

These results highlight the necessity of integrating psychological support into the academic environment as a core component of student success. Educational policymakers and university administrators are encouraged to create emotionally secure learning spaces, particularly for first-year and female students who may face heightened stress and uncertainty. By acknowledging and addressing the emotional dimensions of academic life, higher education institutions can play a critical role in fostering both mental well-being and academic excellence.

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#### *Declaration of Interest*

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

#### *Ethical Considerations*

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants. Ethical considerations in this study were that participation was entirely optional.

#### *Transparency of Data*

By the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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#### *Authors' Contributions*

All authors equally contribute to this study.

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