



ORIGINAL

## Perceived social support and psychological distress in a sample of Peruvian university students: A correlational study

### Apoyo social percibido y malestar psicológico en una muestra de estudiantes universitarios peruanos: Un estudio correlacional

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#### ABSTRACT

**Introduction:** perceived social support plays a crucial role in students' university experience, influencing their emotional well-being, academic adaptation, and success in university.

**Objective:** to determine whether perceived social support is associated with psychological distress in a sample of Peruvian university students.

**Methods:** quantitative, non-experimental, correlational, cross-sectional study. The sample consisted of 220 students of both sexes who were administered the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support and the Psychological Distress Scale, both instruments with adequate psychometric properties. Data were processed using SPSS 25.0, and the Spearman's rho correlation coefficient was used to identify the potential relationship between study variables.

**Results:** it was found that 30 % of students perceived a high level of social support. Additionally, it was identified that the psychological distress level of 35 % of students was regular. Furthermore, it was determined that psychological distress was inversely and significantly correlated with the perceived social support variable ( $\rho = -0,526$ ;  $p < 0,05$ ) and the family ( $\rho = -0,575$ ;  $p < 0,05$ ), friends ( $\rho = -0,501$ ;  $p < 0,05$ ), and others ( $\rho = -0,518$ ;  $p < 0,05$ ) dimensions.

**Conclusions:** perceived social support is inversely and significantly related to psychological distress in a sample of Peruvian university students. Therefore, it is recommended to strengthen social support networks and promote an inclusive environment that encourages open communication and access to mental health resources.

**Keywords:** Perceived Social Support; Psychological Distress; Mental Health; University Students; Psychological Well-Being.

#### RESUMEN

**Introducción:** el apoyo social percibido desempeña un papel crucial en la experiencia universitaria de los estudiantes, influyendo en su bienestar emocional, adaptación académica y éxito en la universidad.

**Objetivo:** determinar si el apoyo social percibido se relaciona con el malestar psicológico en una muestra de estudiantes universitarios peruanos.

**Métodos:** estudio cuantitativo, no experimental, correlacional y de corte transversal. La muestra estuvo conformada por 220 estudiantes de ambos sexos a quienes se les administró la Escala Multidimensional de

Apoyo Social Percibido y la Escala de Malestar Psicológico, ambos instrumentos con adecuadas propiedades psicométricas. Los datos se procesaron a través del software SPSS versión 25 y para identificar la posible relación entre las variables de estudio se utilizó el coeficiente de correlación rho de Spearman.

**Resultados:** se halló que el 30 % de los estudiantes percibió un alto nivel de apoyo social. Asimismo, se identificó que el nivel de malestar psicológico del 35 % de estudiantes fue regular. Por otro lado, se determinó que el malestar psicológico se correlacionó de manera inversa y significativa con la variable apoyo social percibido ( $\rho = -0,526$ ;  $p < 0,05$ ) y las dimensiones familia ( $\rho = -0,575$ ;  $p < 0,05$ ), amigos ( $\rho = -0,501$ ;  $p < 0,05$ ) y otros ( $\rho = -0,518$ ;  $p < 0,05$ ).

**Conclusiones:** el apoyo social percibido se relaciona de manera inversa y significativa con el malestar psicológico en una muestra de estudiantes universitarios peruanos. Por lo tanto, se recomienda fortalecer las redes de apoyo social y promover un ambiente inclusivo que fomente la comunicación abierta y el acceso a recursos de salud mental.

**Palabras clave:** Apoyo Social Percibido; Malestar Psicológico; Salud Mental; Estudiantes Universitarios; Bienestar Psicológico.

## INTRODUCTION

University higher Education is considered a stage of experiences, responsibilities and demands that enable students' personal and professional formation.<sup>(1,2)</sup> This complex environment offers students not only the opportunity to expand their academic knowledge but also to face a series of challenges that go beyond the strictly academic.<sup>(3)</sup> Among the main challenges is the pressure to maintain high academic standards to manage multiple roles and responsibilities, such as balancing work, study, and personal life.<sup>(4)</sup> In this context, perceived social support emerges as a relevant resource for students, offering an emotional and practical safety net that can help them cope effectively with the context above.

Perceived social support is central to the social network of individuals. It refers to the subjective appraisal of the availability and quality of help, understanding, and emotional connection received from their social environment, especially from family, friends, or other close people.<sup>(5)</sup> This concept transcends the existence of social relationships and focuses on the personal perception of feeling supported and accompanied in times of difficulty.<sup>(6)</sup>

Social support theory highlights the relevance of social relationships and individual perception of support in coping with stressful situations.<sup>(7)</sup> From this perspective, having trusted people who provide emotional, instrumental, and informational support can mitigate the adverse impact of stressful events. On the other hand, both self-determination and basic psychological needs theories agree that the interaction between people and their environment plays a crucial role in their development, especially when that environment satisfies their fundamental psychological needs, which can enhance their well-being and growth.<sup>(8)</sup>

In coping with difficult or stressful situations, having trusted people to whom we can express our emotions, problems, and difficulties plays a crucial role.<sup>(9)</sup> The willingness of others to provide support, listen, and share perspectives can generate positive responses by students to stressful events in academic contexts.<sup>(10)</sup> Conversely, the perceived absence of this support may contribute to increased stress, exacerbating the negative experience in challenging situations.<sup>(11)</sup> This recognition underscores the importance of perceived social support as an influential factor in the ability to cope effectively with academic and emotional demands.

Psychological distress has been conceptualized as a complex and challenging emotional state experienced by an individual in response to specific stressors or demands that may result in temporary or permanent consequences for the person.<sup>(12)</sup> This condition manifests when a stressful event impacts physical or mental health, and the person is unable to manage it effectively, triggering emotional chaos.<sup>(13)</sup> This state is characterized by a range of symptoms that include depression, anxiety, and other emotional manifestations.<sup>(14)</sup>

Likewise, psychological distress manifests itself through a variety of additional somatic symptoms, such as insomnia, headaches, and fatigue, which can present in a variety of ways depending on individual circumstances.<sup>(15)</sup> These emotional distresses can be influenced by a number of variables, ranging from biological and psychological factors to socioeconomic and occupational aspects, as well as by the lifestyle adopted by the individual.<sup>(16)</sup>

The relationship between perceived social support and psychological distress is a topic of great relevance in the field of mental health, especially among the university population. Given the importance of promoting the emotional well-being of university students and mitigating the impact of psychological distress on their academic performance and quality of life, the findings obtained may contribute to improving the understanding of the factors that influence students' mental health and inform the implementation of interventions focused

on strengthening social support networks and promoting a healthier and more favorable university environment for the comprehensive development of students.

Therefore, the present research aimed to determine whether perceived social support is related to psychological distress in a sample of Peruvian university students.

## **METHODS**

A quantitative approach was employed, which consisted of the collection and analysis of numerical data to explore the relationship between the study variables. The design adopted was non-experimental, as it did not involve intentional manipulations of the variables but rather observations and recordings in their natural environment. In addition, the study was of the cross-sectional correlational type since data were collected at a specific time to describe and analyze possible relationships between the variables.<sup>(17)</sup>

The population consisted of 515 students enrolled in the 2023-II cycle in the professional career of Education at a Peruvian public university, and the sample consisted of 220 students, a number considered by means of a probability sample with a confidence level of 95 % and a significance level of 5 %. Inclusion criteria were students of both sexes who were duly enrolled and of legal age. On the other hand, as exclusion criteria, students who did not agree to participate in the research and those who were not in the Whatsapp groups of the different courses were considered.

The data were collected through a virtual survey elaborated in Google Forms, which consisted of three sections. In the first section, sociodemographic and academic information was requested from the students (gender and year of study). In the second section, the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support was used, while in the third section, the Psychological Distress Scale was administered.

The Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support<sup>(18)</sup> assesses the degree to which a person experiences feelings of appreciation, affection, and belonging to a group, specifically in relation to family members, friends, and other significant people in his or her life. The scale is structured in three dimensions (family, friends, and others), consists of 12 Likert-type items with four response options (almost never, frequently, almost always, and always), and can be administered individually or collectively. In a previous research conducted in the Peruvian context<sup>(19)</sup>, it was found to have adequate psychometric properties ( $\omega = 0,970$ ).

The Psychological Distress Scale<sup>(20)</sup> assesses various aspects of psychological well-being, including symptoms of anxiety, depression, stress, and other negative emotional states. It is a unidimensional scale consisting of 10 items that are quantitatively scored using a Likert scale with five alternatives (never, almost never, sometimes, almost always, and always). In the version adapted to the Peruvian context,<sup>(21)</sup> it was determined to have adequate psychometric properties ( $\alpha = 0,899$ ;  $\omega = 0,901$ ).

Data collection was carried out after obtaining permission from the competent university authorities. Subsequently, through the WhatsApp messaging application, students were invited to participate and sent the survey link. The messages were sent to all the WhatsApp groups of the courses in which the students were enrolled. This procedure aimed to achieve as much student participation as possible. The objective of the research was explained to them, and instructions were provided so that they could develop the items. This procedure lasted approximately 20 minutes, and after confirming the participation of the 220 students, access to the instruments was disabled.

The data analysis was divided into two stages. The first consisted of a descriptive analysis using SPSS version 25 software, where a figure was generated to visualize the frequency distribution of the variables. In the second stage, an inferential analysis was performed and consolidated in four tables. Since the variables did not follow a normal distribution, Spearman's correlation coefficient was used to evaluate the relationships between them, with a value of  $p < 0,05$  being considered significant. In addition, the Chi-Square test ( $X^2$ ) was used to explore associations between sociodemographic variables, perceived social support, and psychological distress.

In line with the ethical principles established in the Declaration of Helsinki, this research was conducted with strict adherence to ethical standards. Informed consent was obtained from all participating students, who were fully informed about the purpose and procedures of the research. The confidentiality of the data collected was guaranteed, and the welfare of the participants was protected at all times through the use of identification codes instead of full names.

## **RESULTS**

Table 1 shows the distribution of the sample. It can be seen that, of the total number of participants, 56,4 % were women and 43,6 % were men. As for the year of study, 32,3 % were in their first year, 24,1 % in their second year, 17,7 % in their third year, 14,1 % in their fourth year and 11,8 % in their fifth year.

Table 1. Distribution of the sample			
Variables		n= 220	%
Gender	Male	96	43,6
	Female	124	56,4
Year of study	First	71	32,3
	Second	53	24,1
	Third	39	17,7
	Fourth	31	14,1
	Fifth	26	11,8

Figure 1 shows that 30 % of the students perceived a high level of social support, while 23,2 % considered it to be fair, 22,7 % said it was low, 13,8 % expressed that it was very high, and 10,3 % reported that it was shallow. When evaluating the dimensions, it was determined that the support of their family (42,3 %) and friends (30,9 %) was predominantly valued at a high level. In comparison, the support of other people in their environment was predominantly valued at a low level (39,5 %). The above indicates, at a general level, that they feel supported and emotionally accompanied by their family and friends, which may contribute positively to their psychological well-being and adaptation to the university environment.

Figure 1 also shows that the level of psychological distress of 35 % of students was fair; 24,1 % showed a low level, 18,6 % showed a high level, 11,8 % showed a very high level, and 10,3 % showed a shallow level. The above indicates that more than one-third of students experienced some significant emotional and psychological symptoms (anxiety, depression, stress, or other negative emotional states) that could affect their daily functioning and general well-being.

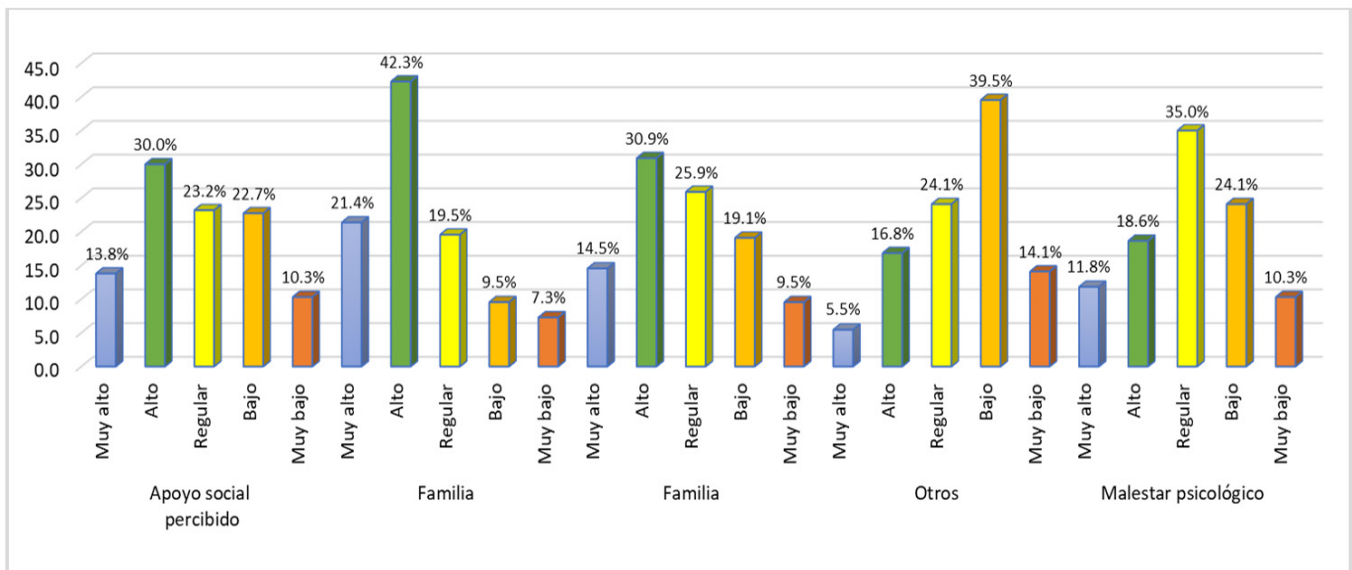


Figure 1. Percentage distribution of variables and dimensions  
Source: Surveys

Table 2 shows that perceived social support was not significantly associated with any sociodemographic variable (sex and year of study). In other words, the level of social support perceived by the students did not vary significantly as a function of the students' sex or year of study. This could indicate that other factors not considered in this analysis could be influencing the perception of social support among participants.

Table 3 shows that psychological distress was significantly associated with the sex of the participants ( $p < 0,05$ ). In that sense, it is observed that women presented higher levels of psychological distress than men. On the other hand, psychological distress did not report a statistically significant association with the year of study ( $p > 0,05$ ).

Table 4 shows the results of the correlation analysis between the study variables and the dimensions. In that understanding, it was determined that psychological distress correlated inversely and significantly with the variable perceived social support ( $\rho = -0,526$ ;  $p < 0,05$ ) and the dimensions family ( $\rho = -0,575$ ;  $p < 0,05$ ), friends ( $\rho = -0,501$ ;  $p < 0,05$ ) and others ( $\rho = -0,518$ ;  $p < 0,05$ ).

**Table 2.** Association between perceived social support and sociodemographic and academic variables

Variables		Perceived social support					P* (X <sup>2</sup> )
		Very low	Under	Regular	High	Very high	
Sex	Male	12 (12,5 %)	19 (19,8 %)	23 (24,0 %)	30 (31,2 %)	12 (12,5 %)	>0,05
	Female	11 (8,9 %)	31 (25,0 %)	28 (22,6 %)	36 (29,0 %)	18 (14,5 %)	
Year of study	First	8 (11,3 %)	14 (19,7 %)	17 (23,9 %)	21 (29,6 %)	11 (15,5 %)	>0,05
	Second	5 (9,4 %)	11 (20,8 %)	12 (22,6 %)	18 (34,0 %)	7 (13,2 %)	
	Third	4 (10,3 %)	8 (20,5 %)	9 (23,1 %)	13 (33,3 %)	5 (12,8 %)	
	Fourth	3 (9,7 %)	7 (22,5 %)	7 (22,5 %)	10 (32,3 %)	4 (12,9 %)	
	Fifth	3 (11,5 %)	10 (38,5 %)	6 (23,1 %)	4 (15,4 %)	3 (11,5 %)	

\* P-value according to Chi-Square test.

**Table 3.** Association between psychological distress and sociodemographic and academic variables

Variables		Psychological discomfort					P* (X <sup>2</sup> )
		Very low	Under	Regular	High	Very high	
Sex	Male	16 (16,7 %)	26 (27,1 %)	33 (34,4 %)	11 (11,5 %)	10 (10,4 %)	<0,05
	Female	7 (5,6 %)	27 (21,8 %)	44 (35,5 %)	30 (24,2 %)	16 (12,9 %)	
Year of study	First	7 (9,9 %)	17 (23,9 %)	23 (32,4 %)	16 (22,5 %)	8 (11,3 %)	>0,05
	Second	6 (11,3 %)	13 (24,5 %)	18 (34,0 %)	9 (17,0 %)	7 (13,2 %)	
	Third	4 (10,3 %)	10 (25,6 %)	13 (33,3 %)	7 (17,9 %)	5 (12,8 %)	
	Fourth	3 (9,7 %)	8 (25,8 %)	11 (35,5 %)	6 (19,4 %)	3 (9,7 %)	
	Fifth	3 (11,5 %)	5 (19,2 %)	12 (46,2 %)	3 (11,5 %)	3 (11,5 %)	

\* P-value according to Chi-Square test

**Table 4.** Correlation between perceived social support and psychological distress

Variables	Perceived social support	Family	Friends	Others	Psychological discomfort
Perceived social support	1	-	-	-	-
Family	0,839**	1	-	-	-
Friends	0,810**	0,784**	1	-	-
Others	0,863**	0,801**	0,739**	1	-
Psychological distress	-0,526**	-0,575**	-0,501**	-0,518**	1

\*\* p<0,01

## DISCUSSION

University education represents a crucial stage in the lives of many students, marked by a series of challenges that encompass academic, social and personal challenges, such as adaptation to independent living or time management,<sup>(22)</sup> and that can lead, among other mental health problems, to psychological distress. Among these challenges, the pressure to maintain high academic standards, the overwhelming workload, competition among peers and uncertainty about the professional future stand out.<sup>(23)</sup> Faced with this reality, perceived social support could be a strategy to cope with these difficulties. Therefore, the present research sought to determine whether perceived social support is related to psychological distress in a sample of Peruvian university students.

Preliminarily, it was found that the predominant level of social support perceived by the students was high, indicating that they felt supported and understood by their social networks, especially by their family and friends. This perception of having strong social support may positively influence their emotional well-being and their ability to cope with the challenges they face during their college experience. Similar results were obtained in Mexico,<sup>(24)</sup> where they reported that, in general terms and in each of their factors, perceived social support was high. Similarly, in Chile<sup>(25)</sup> they found that students perceived social support to be high.

Another preliminary finding shows that the predominant level of psychological distress among students was regular, meaning that more than one third of the total experienced significant emotional and psychological symptoms, such as anxiety, depression, stress and other negative emotional states. These experiences could have a profound impact on their daily functioning and general well-being, affecting their academic performance, interpersonal relationships, and overall quality of life. The results described are consistent with research that



determined that the level of psychological distress characterizing the students was moderate.<sup>(26,27)</sup>

Similarly, it was observed that women presented greater symptoms of psychological distress compared to men. This result is consistent with what was reported in a research conducted in Nigeria,<sup>(28)</sup> where they found a higher prevalence of psychological distress among females. Our finding could be attributed to several factors. For one, hormonal fluctuations throughout the menstrual cycle and during pregnancy may influence women's mood and emotional well-being.<sup>(29)</sup> These hormonal changes may make them more susceptible to experiencing symptoms of anxiety and depression at certain stages of life.<sup>(30)</sup> In addition, women often face multiple roles and responsibilities, such as domestic activities, child rearing and family care.<sup>(31)</sup> This additional burden may generate greater stress and pressure, which increases the risk of suffering from higher levels of psychological distress in this group.

An important finding shows that perceived social support was inversely and significantly related to psychological distress. In addition, the dimensions family, friends and others were also inversely and significantly related to psychological distress. This implies that the higher the level of social support perceived by an individual, the lower the probability of experiencing psychological distress. Similar results were obtained in research carried out in university students.<sup>(32,33,34)</sup>

The described finding finds support in the social support theory,<sup>(35)</sup> which postulates that the perceived availability of emotional, instrumental and informational support networks can influence the mental health and emotional well-being of individuals. This theory also suggests that a high level of perceived social support acts as a buffer against stress and environmental stressors, reducing the likelihood of experiencing psychological distress. When people perceive that they have strong social support, they feel more understood, supported, and able to cope with the emotional and psychological challenges of everyday life.<sup>(36)</sup> Therefore, this finding underscores the importance of perceived social support as a key resource for promoting emotional well-being and preventing mental health problems in the college student population.<sup>(37)</sup>

It is important to recognize some limitations in the present research. First, the sample used was relatively small and homogeneous, which could limit the generalizability of the results. In addition, the instrument used was self-administered, which may have introduced biases in the participants' responses. On the other hand, the study design was cross-sectional, which makes it difficult to establish causal relationships between variables. Consequently, it is recommended that future research should increase the sample size to ensure greater representativeness, consider the inclusion of complementary data collection instruments, and conduct longitudinal studies to examine the causal relationships between these variables and achieve a deeper understanding of their dynamics and evolution in the university context.

## CONCLUSIONS

The university stage marks a period of growth and transition in the lives of students, where they face new challenges and opportunities. In addition, as they move through this stage, students must face various academic demands, interpersonal relationships and personal challenges. In this complex context, perceived social support emerges as an underlying factor that can influence their experience and emotional well-being.

It is concluded that perceived social support is inversely and significantly related to psychological distress in a sample of Peruvian university students. This implies that as perceived social support increases, psychological distress among students tends to decrease. Furthermore, this relationship suggests that perceived social support, from friends, family or other sources, acts as a protective factor against psychological distress.

Therefore, it is recommended to implement strategies that strengthen social support networks within the university environment. This could include the creation of programs and services that foster connection among students, promoting the formation of support groups and facilitating access to mental health resources. It is also essential to raise awareness among the university community about the importance of social support and to banish stigmas related to seeking psychological help. In addition, the implementation of training programs for students and faculty could be considered, with the aim of improving communication and emotional support skills. These measures could contribute to creating a more supportive and understanding university environment that promotes the emotional well-being of all its members.

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