

RESEARCH ARTICLE (ORIGINAL)

Positive Mental Health and Academic Perceptions and Expectations Among Nursing Students: A Descriptive Correlational Study

Saúde Mental Positiva, Percepções e Expectativas Acadêmicas dos Estudantes de Enfermagem: Um Estudo Descritivo-Correlacional

Salud Mental Positiva, Percepciones y Expectativas Académicas de los Estudiantes de Enfermería: Un Estudio Descriptivo-Correlacional

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Abstract

Background: Positive mental health strengthens and enhances overall mental health. Entering higher education involves transitions and adaptations that may challenge nursing students' mental health.

Objective: To examine the relationship between positive mental health and academic perceptions and expectations among students enrolled in an undergraduate nursing program.

Methodology: A cross-sectional, descriptive correlational study was conducted using a nonprobability convenience sample of 127 Portuguese nursing students. Data were collected between April and May 2024 through an online questionnaire that included sociodemographic and clinical variables, the Positive Mental Health Questionnaire ($\alpha = 0.93$), and the Academic Perceptions Questionnaire - Expectations ($\alpha = 0.95$). Data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics, version 29.0. An ethics committee approved the study.

Results: The sample was predominantly female (77.2%) and demonstrated high overall levels of positive mental health ($M = 121.14$; $SD = 16.77$), as well as a high overall mean score for academic perceptions and expectations ($M = 36.00$; $SD = 4.53$). A weak but statistically significant positive correlation was found between the total scores of the two questionnaires ($rho = 0.197$; $p \leq 0.05$).

Conclusion: Nursing students with higher levels of positive mental health tend to report higher academic expectations.

Keywords: mental health; aspirations, psychological; students, nursing; education, nursing; cross-sectional studies

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Resumo

Enquadramento: A Saúde Mental Positiva, foca-se em potenciar a Saúde Mental (SM). Ingressar no Ensino-Superior (ES), pressupõe transições e adaptações. Estas poderão constituir desafios para a SM dos Estudantes de Enfermagem (EE).

Objetivo: Avaliar a relação entre a Saúde Mental Positiva (SM+) e as Percepções Acadêmicas – Expectativas (PA-Exp) dos estudantes do Curso de Licenciatura em Enfermagem (CLE).

Metodologia: Estudo transversal, descritivo-correlacional, amostra não probabilística acidental de 127 EE. Colheita de dados abril-maio/2024, através de questionário online: dados sociodemográficos e clínicos, *Questionário de SM+* ($\alpha = 0,930$) e *Questionário de PA-Exp* ($\alpha = 0,950$). Tratamento e análise de dados realizado no *Software IBM SPSS, versão 29.0*. Obteve parecer favorável de Comissão de Ética.

Resultados: Amostra predominantemente feminina (77,20%), com elevados níveis de SM+ global (121,14 + 16,77) e elevada média global de 36,00 + 4,53 no *Questionário de PA-Exp*. Correlação positiva fraca, estatisticamente significativa entre os totais globais dos questionários ($rho = 0,197$; $p \leq 0,05$).

Conclusão: EE com níveis mais elevados de SM+ tendem a apresentar PA-Exp superiores.

Palavras-chave: saúde mental; aspirações psicológicas; estudantes de enfermagem; educação em enfermagem; estudos transversais

Resumen

Marco contextual: La salud mental positiva se centra en potenciar la salud mental (SM). Ingresar en la educación superior (ES) implica transiciones y adaptaciones. Estas pueden suponer retos para la SM de los estudiantes de enfermería (EE).

Objetivo: Evaluar la relación entre la salud mental positiva (SM+) y las percepciones académicas, expectativas (PA-Exp) de los estudiantes del Grado en Enfermería (CLE).

Metodología: Estudio transversal, descriptivo-correlacional, muestra no probabilística accidental de 127 EE. Recopilación de datos entre abril y mayo de 2024, mediante cuestionario en línea: datos sociodemográficos y clínicos, Cuestionario de SM+ ($\alpha = 0,930$) y Cuestionario de PA-Exp ($\alpha = 0,950$). Tratamiento y análisis de datos realizado en el *Software IBM SPSS® versión 29*. Obtuvo el dictamen favorable de la Comisión de Ética.

Resultados: Muestra predominantemente femenina (77,20%), con elevados niveles de SM+ global (121,14 + 16,77) y elevada media global de 36,00 + 4,53 en el Cuestionario de PA-Exp. Correlación positiva débil, estadísticamente significativa entre los totales globales de los cuestionarios ($rho = 0,197$; $p \leq 0,05$).

Conclusión: EE con niveles más altos de SM+ tienden a presentar una PA-Exp superior.



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Introduction

Positive Mental Health (PMH) is defined as an integral component of overall mental health that focuses on promoting and strengthening well-being among healthy individuals (Ribeiro et al., 2023). Existing studies in the field highlight the importance of adopting healthy lifestyles (Magalhães et al., 2023; Sierra et al., 2022), as they are associated with higher levels of PMH (Maciel et al., 2023; Valentim et al., 2023).

Entering higher education represents an important milestone, as this new phase involves a series of transitions and adaptations accompanied by challenges and demands that may affect mental well-being (Carvalho et al., 2024; Francisco & Arriaga, 2022; Vedana et al., 2022) and academic performance (Barreto et al., 2024; Teixeira et al., 2022). In addition to adapting to higher education, nursing students face further challenges (Souza et al., 2023; Tiga-Loza et al., 2024) associated with the nature of the nursing program, such as clinical practice in real-world learning environments.

Thus, this study was conducted to evaluate the relationship between PMH and academic perceptions and expectations (AP-Exp) among students enrolled in a nursing undergraduate program.

Background

The concept of PMH was introduced and developed in Europe by Maria Teresa Lluch Canut. It is defined as a specific domain within mental health that results from the interaction of multiple factors (Lluch, 2008), and described as “a dynamic and fluctuating construct that encompasses thoughts and, most notably, both positive and negative feelings, since it is just as healthy to feel concerned when facing uncertain situations as it is to feel happy when everything is going well” (Lluch, 2008, p. 18). During their academic lives, students gain greater independence from their parents and encounter realities and responsibilities that were previously unknown to them (Campos et al., 2024; Ferreira et al., 2023; Massano-Cardoso et al., 2024). Attention to AP-Exp has recently emerged as a promising factor for academic success. Expectations include the goals or aspirations that students set for themselves when attending higher education (Araújo et al., 2014). Enrollment in a degree program should be carefully prepared so that stressors (such as examinations or clinical teachings) do not negatively influence this phase (Araújo et al., 2022; Sequeira & Carvalho, 2009, 2014). In an exploratory study conducted exclusively with nursing students, Sequeira et al. (2013) found that depression and anxiety were frequently diagnosed in this population. Substance use was also identified as a concern (Rodrigues et al., 2023), being more prevalent among women. This issue is “worrying because of the consequences for students’ health and the repercussions it may have on their actions, essentially in terms of clinical teachings” (Sequeira et al., 2013, pp. 178–179).

In summary, the literature suggests a cause-and-effect

relationship between mental health levels and the academic demands of undergraduate nursing programs. These demands require students to demonstrate a high degree of maturity and adaptive capacity when facing multiple risk factors (Sequeira et al., 2013; Silva et al., 2024). The literature review identified no studies examining the relationship between PMH and AP-Exp, which underscored the innovative nature of this research. Therefore, this study aimed to provide scientific evidence to promote and improve academic performance and success, as well as, in the long term, to enhance evidence-based practice and reinforce nurses’ professional recognition. It also addressed the following specific objectives: to assess PMH; to assess AP-Exp; and to examine the relationship between PMH, AP-Exp, and the sociodemographic and clinical characteristics of nursing students.

Research question

What is the relationship between PMH and AP-Exp among nursing degree students at a higher education institution?

Methodology

This was a quantitative, cross-sectional, descriptive correlational study. The inclusion criteria were age ≥ 18 years and enrollment in the nursing degree program. The exclusion criterion was being an international student.

The study was conducted at a private Portuguese higher education institution, where 157 students were enrolled in the nursing degree program during the 2023/2024 academic year. A nonprobability sample of 127 nursing students was obtained. The sample size was calculated using the Qualtrics online platform, based on the formula for finite populations and a 95% confidence level, which recommended a minimum of 112 nursing students. Data collection took place between April and May 2024. Nursing students received access to the questionnaire link (created using Microsoft 365 Business) through their institutional email. The email included an invitation to participate in the study (declaration of acceptance), as well as the study objectives and procedures. Confidentiality and anonymity were explicitly guaranteed, and participation was voluntary. After accessing the link, students completed and submitted the questionnaire. Participants’ email addresses were not accessible to the research team. Most questions were closed-ended. The questionnaire consisted of three parts: (a) sociodemographic, academic, and clinical data; (b) the Positive Mental Health Questionnaire (PMHQ); and (c) the Academic Perceptions Questionnaire – Expectations (APQ-Exp). Permission to use the PMHQ and APQ-Exp was requested and obtained from the respective authors.

The PMHQ was translated and validated for the Portuguese population by Sequeira and Carvalho (2009, 2014). Based on the Multifactorial Model of PMH, it comprises six factors and includes 39 items, unevenly

distributed across the factors. The total score ranges from 39 to 156, with higher scores indicating higher levels of PMH. Results may also be interpreted for each factor. The APQ-Exp is academic in scope and consists of 42 items equally distributed across seven factors. Responses

are rated on a 6-point Likert scale, where 1 corresponds to low academic expectations and 6 to high academic expectations. The results may indicate low or high levels of expectations. The description of the factors for each instrument is presented in Table 1.

Table 1.

Description of the factors of the PMHQ and APQ-Exp

PMHQ	APQ-Exp
F1: Personal satisfaction	F1: Political Engagement and Citizenship
F2: Prosocial Attitude	F2: Training for Employment
F3: Self-control	F3: Social Interaction
F4: Autonomy	F4: Student Mobility
F5: Problem Solving and Self-actualization	F5: Social Pressure
F6: Interpersonal Relationship Skills	F6: Personal and Social Development
	F7: Quality of Education

Note. PMHQ = Positive Mental Health Questionnaire; APQ-Exp = Academic Perceptions Questionnaire – Expectations.

Both instruments demonstrated good internal consistency. For inferential statistical analysis, the normality of the variables was assessed using the Kolmogorov–Smirnov test. The PMHQ showed a normal distribution; therefore, the one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA), the independent-samples Student's *t* test, and the significance test (*p*-value) for differences between means were applied. The APQ-Exp did not meet the normality assumption; therefore, the Kruskal–Wallis test and the Mann–Whitney *U* test were used, along with the corresponding significance tests (*p*-value). In addition, Spearman's correlation coefficient was calculated because the variables presented different distributions, accompanied by the respective significance test (*p*-value). A 95% confidence level was adopted.

The study received a favorable opinion from an Ethics Committee (No. 004/24, April 2024). It complied with the principles of the Helsinki Declaration, the Tokyo Declaration, the World Health Organization, and the European Union, as well as the principles of the Portuguese National Data Protection Commission set out in Law No. 43/2004.

Participants indicated their voluntary intention to par-

ticipate by providing informed consent.

Results

The sample included 127 nursing students, predominantly female (77.20%), with a mean age of 21.93 years (*SD* = 4.18). Most participants (85.00%) were not employed while studying. Of the total sample, 22.80% had previously received a diagnosis of a mental disorder from a mental health professional, and 15.70% had sought health services for a mental health problem. Regarding substance use, 8.60% of nursing students reported tobacco use “1 to 2 times,” and 26.70% reported alcohol consumption “1 to 3 times per month.” Concerning illegal drug use, cannabis was the most frequently reported substance, with 10.70% of nursing students indicating its use.

In line with the specific objective of assessing PMH among nursing students, Table 2 shows that 62.99% were classified as having a High level of PMH, while 37.01% were classified at a Moderate level. Factor 2 had the highest proportion of nursing students at the High level (92.13%), whereas Factor 3 had the lowest proportion (32.28%).

Table 2.*Distribution of nursing students by PMH level*

PMHQ	“High”		“Moderate”		“Low”	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
F1	78	61.42	40	31.50	9	7.09
F2	117	92.13	9	7.09	1	0.79
F3	41	32.28	68	53.54	18	14.17
F4	57	44.88	53	41.73	17	13.39
F5	70	55.12	53	41.73	4	3.15
F6	65	51.18	59	46.46	3	2.36
Global	80	62.99	47	37.01	-	-

Note. PMHQ = Positive Mental Health Questionnaire; F = Factor; *n* = Sample; % = Percentage.

Regarding the specific objective of analyzing AP-Exp, Table 3 indicates that the highest-rated factor was Factor

1 ($M = 5.83$, $SD = 0.66$), whereas the lowest-rated factor was Factor 3 ($M = 4.83$, $SD = 1.17$).

Table 3.

Mean, median, standard deviation, minimum value, maximum value, and Cronbach's alpha of the APQ-Exp factors

APQ-Exp	<i>M</i>	<i>Me</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Min</i>	<i>Max</i>	α
F1	5.54	5.83	0.66	2.50	6.00	0.880
F2	5.50	5.66	0.63	2.67	6.00	0.870
F3	4.65	4.83	1.17	1.17	6.00	0.900
F4	5.31	5.50	0.66	2.67	6.00	0.800
F5	4.82	5.00	0.92	1.00	6.00	0.770
F6	5.13	5.16	0.67	2.67	6.00	0.720
F7	5.02	5.16	0.85	2.00	6.00	0.800
Global	36.00	36.50	4.53	18.50	42.00	0.950

Note. APQ-Exp = Academic Perceptions Questionnaire – Expectations; F = Factor; *M* = Mean; *Me* = Median; *SD* = Standard deviation; *Min* = Minimum; *Max* = Maximum; α = Cronbach's alpha.

With regard to the relationships between sociodemographic, clinical, PMH, and AP-Exp variables among nursing students, Table 4 presents statistically significant associations. Specifically, the PMHQ revealed significant differences across several factors regarding the variables

“displacement from area of residence,” “substance use,” “years of enrollment,” and “follow-up by a mental health professional.” Regarding the APQ-Exp, statistically significant differences were identified for the variables “age” and “first choice of course and/or institution.”

Table 4.

Statistically significant associations between the instruments' factors and the sociodemographic and academic variables

	F	Age*	Displacement from area of residence**	Substance use***	Years of enrollment***	MH follow-up**	1 st choice (course/institution)**
PMHQ	F2	-	$p = 0.023$	$p = 0.003$	-	-	-
	F3	-	-	-	$p = 0.015$	-	-
	F4	-	-	-	$p = 0.003$	-	-
	F5	-	-	$p = 0.042$	-	$p = 0.029$	-
	F6	-	-	$p = 0.028$	-	-	-
APQ-Exp	F1	$p = 0.005$	-	-	-	-	-
	F3	$p \leq 0.001$	-	-	-	-	-
	F5	$p = 0.006$	-	-	-	-	$p = 0.044$
	F7	$p \leq 0.001$	-	-	-	-	-

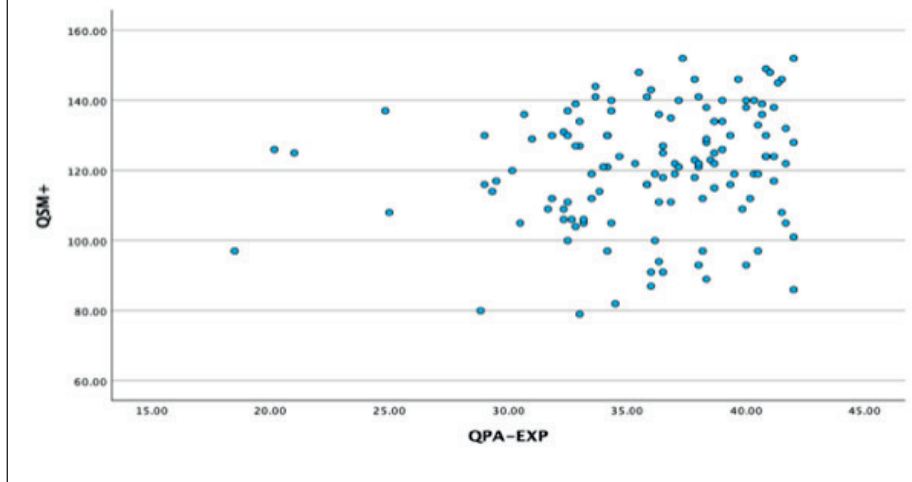
Note. F = Factor; PMHQ = Positive Mental Health Questionnaire; APQ-Exp = Academic Perceptions Questionnaire – Expectations; MH follow-up = Follow-up by a mental health professional.

* Spearman test; ** Mann-Whitney U nonparametric tests; *** Kruskal-Wallis test.

Only statistically significant correlations ($p < 0.05$) are presented.

Finally, Spearman correlations between PMHQ and APQ-Exp factors were analyzed. Several weak but statistically significant correlations were identified

($r_{ho} = .197$, $p \leq 0.05$), indicating that higher PMH levels among nursing students corresponded to higher AP-Exp levels (Figure 1).

Figure 1.*Scatterplot of the relationship between PMH and APQ-Exp*

Discussion

The majority of the sample was female, and the number of nursing students diagnosed with mental disorders has increased in recent years (Cunha, 2020; Lima et al., 2023). This increase appears to have become more pronounced following the COVID-19 pandemic (Palomino et al., 2024; Reis et al., 2025; Sillero et al., 2023). It is also important to consider the potential for underreporting or overreporting of certain behaviors among nursing students (Sequeira et al., 2019).

In the PMHQ, the highest score was observed in Factor 5, consistent with the findings of Cunha (2020). The lowest score was found in Factor 3, similar to the results reported by Nogueira et al. (2025). Overall, most nursing students (62.99%) demonstrated high levels of PMH ($M = 121.14$), consistent with findings from Jauregui-Soriano et al. (2022) and Teixeira et al. (2022).

In the inferential analysis of the PMHQ and the variable “displacement from area of residence,” nursing students who were displaced obtained significantly lower scores in Factor 2. Similar findings were reported by Teixeira et al. (2022). This result may be associated with the need to adapt to a new environment, which may influence social proactivity. Regarding “substance use” (legal and illegal) in the previous three months, statistically significant differences were identified in Factors 2, 5, and 6, with higher scores observed among students who did not report substance use. Concerning “years of enrollment,” statistically significant differences were found in Factors 3 and 4, with third-year students presenting a significantly higher total mean score in the PMHQ. This finding may be related to increased adaptation to and familiarity with the program and future profession. In the analysis of PMH and “follow-up by a mental health professional,” a statistically significant difference was observed in Factor 5, with higher scores among students who were not receiving professional follow-up. Students requiring professional support may present greater vulnerability, which could explain lower PMH scores.

Regarding the APQ-Exp, statistically significant differences were identified in Factors 1, 3, 5, and 7 in relation to “age.” Overall, older participants tended to report lower levels of academic expectations. This finding may be associated with the adjustment of expectations throughout the academic trajectory, resulting from increased familiarity with the profession. The results also indicated that students who were placed in their first-choice program and/or institution demonstrated statistically significant differences in Factor 5. As this study is innovative in its application of this instrument, no comparable studies were identified. However, the literature emphasizes the importance of shaping nursing students’ professional expectations by fostering transferable skills, thus reducing unrealistic expectations and the risk of attrition (Sillero et al., 2023).

The analysis of the relationship between PMHQ and APQ-Exp demonstrated that higher levels of PMH were associated with higher levels of academic expectations. These findings underscore the importance of interventions targeting the core components of the PMH construct, in accordance with the multifactorial model proposed by Lluch (2008), as well as the management of academic expectations among nursing students. Study limitations include the small sample size and the inclusion of students from a single institution.

The development of closer, healthier, and more empathetic academic environments may promote preventive and individualized interventions, thus strengthening the relationship between mental health and the academic context. From a pedagogical perspective, adjustments in educational practices, the development of socioemotional competencies, and the enhancement of academic performance represent potential areas for intervention.

Conclusion

The study achieved its objectives, revealing high levels of PMH among nursing students. Areas requiring interven-

tion were also identified, including self-control, autonomy, self-esteem, and personal satisfaction. A highly positive academic expectations profile was observed, highlighting national and international mobility as an opportunity for academic enrichment. These findings represent the first known data derived exclusively from a sample of Portuguese nursing students.

Higher education institutions should strengthen their engagement with nursing students by disseminating and discussing study findings, expanding PMH promotion programs, implementing mentoring initiatives, and developing programs focused on academic expectations to facilitate the transition to higher education. Future research should adopt multicenter, longitudinal, and comparative designs and establish observatories to monitor academic and professional trajectories. This field of research is essential for promoting well-being and academic success, ultimately contributing to the provision of humanized nursing care.

Author contributions

Conceptualization: Câmara, M. R., Gonçalves, M. L., Lourenço, T. M., Carvalho, J. C.

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Writing – Review and editing: Câmara, M. R., Gonçalves, M. L., Lourenço, T. M.

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Thesis/Dissertation

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