

## Perceived Social Support and Resilience of College Students during COVID-19

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### ABSTRACT

COVID-19 pandemic had numerous effects on people from all age groups in some or the other way. On the other hand there were many factors which have helped people sail through it and out of those two important factors can be perceived social support and resilience. The present study focused on understanding the relationship between perceived social support and resilience of undergraduate college students. The study further aimed to assess gender differences in the context of perceived social support and resilience. Data of 116 undergraduate students was gathered using a personal data sheet, a Multidimensional scale for Perceived Social Support and a Brief Resilience scale. The analysis revealed a positive significant correlation of total Perceived Social Support, social support from significant other and friends with Resilience. The t-test results showed there is no significant gender difference for perceived social support from friends, family, significant other, total perceived social support and resilience. The study in this perspective suggests enhancing perceived social support can increase the resilience among youth across both the genders and the results can further be used for establishing ways to increase perceived social support.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, social support, resilience, college students

The effects of lockdown and quarantine have already started getting attention, people's health, physical and mental is deteriorating with the stress, fear, depression, trauma about uncertainty of future and other losses like financial crises, loss of job, fear of not meeting essential requirements and many more. As per the survey of the Indian Psychiatric Society (2020) there is a 20% increase in mental illness cases due to the worries about work, health, finance, and strain in relationships. Observations from history shows that any pandemic is a disastrous event which not only affects the physical health of individuals but it also has psychological consequences. But COVID-19 pandemic has brought various changes to lives of individuals including lot of uncertainty, varied daily schedules, social aloofness, and financial burdens. Therefore, the pandemic has also lead to various psychological effects on all generations. Though it is a stressful event, it is also expected that people would show resilience in such times and during such times of isolation and quarantine people would come with support for each other in some form if not physically. (Fungui Li, et.al, 2021). In

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India majority of the organizations, schools, and colleges started going online since March 2020 and since then the life has changed drastically. One generation which might have been affected badly is the college going students as in this age of exploring and hanging out they had to get stuck between the four walls. Hence, studying the factors that could be protective (e.g., psychological resilience, perceived social support, psychological wellbeing) for them is significant in such time for which the present study focused on studying the relationship of perceived social support and resilience among college going students.

Social support means having a set of people mostly includes family, friends, and significant other to go to during the time of need or crises. According to Cobb (1979), social support is the knowledge that he/she is loved, cared, respected and is a part of a mutually needy network. In simple words Yildirim (1997) defines social support as a social and psychological support gained from one's environment. Social support positively assists the individual in learning coping strategies, irrespective of the level of stress in life (Cohen & Wills, 1985). According to Caplan social support serves three significant purposes, which are: 1) Social support aggregate provides a person with a sense of self-worth through validation and may act as a buffer against disease. 2) A support system may act as a refuge to which a person might return for rest and recovery. 3) A support system induces an enduring pattern of continuous or intermittent ties that play a significant part in maintaining the psychological and physical integrity of the individual over time (1974). The in-depth evaluation of social support leads to the understanding of two types of social support; received social support and perceived social support. Received social support is the amount of supportive behaviours received by a person while perceived social support is the belief that one will have support from his/her social environment majorly from friends and family in the face of difficulty. Perceived social support is also understood as the presence of support resources when they are in need, and it can be recognized in personal qualitative perspectives and be measured and also it is more influential on mental health as compared to received social support (Fikret Gülaçti, 2010). Sorias (1988) defined "Perceived social support as in individual's overall evaluation of whether social resources are sufficiently supportive or not."

Resilience is defined as the ability to overcome hardships and flourish in the face of them (Wagnild & Young, 1993; Ryff & Singer, 2003), to restore from stressful life events or maintain equilibrium under significant threats (Smith et al., 2008), and to bounce back from adversities, adopting positive coping strategies (Masten et al., 1999). An understanding of the construct of resilience is different in different disciplines. For instance, in the field of psychology resiliency is defined as the capacity to bounce back and to endure hardship by repairing oneself (Higgins, 1994; Wolin & Wolin, 1993). According to psychiatry, resilience is understood as the psychological and biological strength humans use to adapt and face the change successfully (Flach, 1988). Few studies explain resilience as a personal characteristic, while a few others consider that resilience can be learned and developed through environmental interaction. Masten also believes that resilience depends more on strength of the protective systems than with the definite nature of the adversity faced. That is people with less protective resources may suffer a large number of negative results in the face of even a low level of difficulty. An individual who has most or all of these protective resources may be able to deal with significant adversity with a minimum of disturbance.

The broad understanding of resilience is that it is not an innate personality trait rather an acquired quality through a process of interaction of various factors during the phase of difficulty. There are many factors connected to family, school, and environment in which the

person lives, upbringing, etc. contribute to the development of resilience (Garmtezy, 1983; Rodgers & Rose, 2002). An individual's environment also includes the people around and the perception of support from them, leading to social support as one of the contributing factors to resilience. A review research showed resilience can play a part in protecting mental health, speedy recovery from crisis and alleviating negative effects of disasters (Davydov, Stewart, Ritchie, and Chaudieu, 2010) which makes resilience as one of the important factors to study during COVID-19 pandemic.

### ***Perceived Social Support and Resilience***

Researches suggest that individuals with good support from the environment tend to be resilient in coping with challenging life situations. Resiliency not only helps in coping but it could be instrumental in preventing various negative effects of adverse situations. Stroebe (2000), Wills & Fegan (2001) have proposed that social support helps people in dealing with stressful and traumatic incidents and facilitates in taking rational decisions. According to resilience report by American Psychological Association: “Several studies show that the key factor in resilience is to have caring and supportive relationships within and outside the family. Relationships that create love and trust, provide role models and offer reassurance that strengthen a person’s resilience” (Sutti, 2017).

Malkoc and Yalcin's (2015) research shows that social support from friends, family and significant other mediates the relationship between resilience and psychological well-being among university students. Their study indicates that social support leads to resilience among university students thus, increasing their psychological well-being as well. Wilks and Spivey's (2010) study to find out the effect of social support on the relationship of academic stress and resilience in undergraduate students concluded that support given by friends has a positive effect on resilience by decreasing the level of students' academic stress. Zaleski, Levey-Thors, and Schiaffino (1998) also found that social support from others helps students in efficiently adapting to college life and adjustment which is considered as an outcome of resilience. Researches indicate that social support from various sources has a positive effect on the ability of an individual to cope with stress by making them more resilient. From the literature review a research gap is observed as there is lack of research for relationship of perceived social support and resilience among Indian college students and specifically from Gandhinagar colleges/universities. Therefore the present study was aimed to study the relationship between perceived social support (from friends, family and significant other) and resilience among undergraduate students.

### ***Gender differences in Perceived Social Support and resilience.***

Gender is an important facet that has an impact on the perceived social support and resiliency levels among college students. Researches across different populations have shown differences in the way males and females perceive social support; female students from USA, Canada and Malaysia reported having higher level of social support as compared to male students (Allen and Stoltenberg 1995; Asberg et al. Mackinnon 2012; Nicpon et al. 2006; Tam and Lim 2009; Spitzer 2000; Weckwerth Flynn 2006) while male college students from Iran have reported high perceived social support than female college students (Zamani-Alavijeh, Dehkordi, and Shahry 2017). Results of Tinajero, et al's study to analyse gender differences for perceived social support level among Spanish students show differences for various factors of perceived social support, and overall women perceived higher social support as compared to men. The same study also reported effect of parents' education on the level of social support perceived by a student.

Resilience researches have also shown similar trend across different populations. A study on students in Tehran by Manijeh et al have found high resilience among girls while Banerjee, et al's (2018) study on Indian students reported high resilience in boys. Both perceived social support and resilience can have influence of gender roles of a specific culture, region as well as socioeconomic and educational backgrounds. Because of such variations it is difficult to generalize the findings of study from one region to other therefore it is important to separately study gender differences for perceived social support and resilience among college students of different regions within one country. Hence, the focus of present study is also to study gender differences among college students from Gandhinagar.

### **MATERIALS & METHODS**

#### ***Objectives***

The primary objective of the present study was to study the correlation between Perceived Social Support and Resilience of undergraduate college students. The secondary objective was to assess gender differences in the context of Perceived Social Support and Resilience.

#### ***Hypotheses***

The following hypotheses were formed and tested in the present research.

- 1) There is no significant relationship between Perceived Social Support and Resilience.
- 2) There is no significant relationship between Perceived Social Support factors (significant other, friends, and family) and Resilience.
- 3) There is no significant gender difference in context to Perceived Social Support.
- 4) There is no significant gender difference in context to Resilience.

#### ***Sample:***

The sample group for the present study was 116 students studying in BA and BBA colleges of Gandhinagar. The efforts were made to keep equal representation of gender as one of the objectives of study was to see gender differences for Perceived social support and Resilience. But the researcher could only gather close to equal male-female ratio which was 65 females and 51 males.

#### ***Tools used:***

Perceived Social Support was measured by the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS) by Nancy Dahlem, Sara Zimet, Gordon Farley, and Gregory Zimet. It measures support perceptions from 3 sources: Family, Friends, and a Significant Other. It is a 12 item scale with 7 point Likert responses (1= very strongly disagree to 7= very strongly agree).

Resilience was measured by the Brief Resilience Scale developed by Bruce W. Smith, Jeanne Dalen, Kathryn Wiggins, Erin Tooley, Paulette Christopher, and Jennifer Bernard. It is a six-item scale with 5 point Likert response pattern where 1 is strongly disagree and 5 is strongly agree.

#### ***Procedure:***

Before beginning the data collection permission to use the tools was obtained from the authors through email. Then data was collected using snowball sampling method. Few faculties, students from colleges were approached and requested to circulate questionnaire through Google forms link to their students and friends respectively. The faculties were very

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cooperative and helped the researcher with data collection. The male female ratio was maintained equally as much as possible during the data collection.

### Variables:

- Perceived Social Support
- Resilience

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

To test the research hypotheses Pearson Product moment correlation and t-test were calculated using SPSS version 21.

**Table 1: Table showing Mean and Standard Deviation for Perceived Social Support from friends, family, significant other, total perceived social support and resilience.**

| Variables         | Mean | Std. Deviation |
|-------------------|------|----------------|
| SIGNIFICANT OTHER | 5.33 | 1.740          |
| FAMILY            | 5.55 | 1.457          |
| FRIENDS           | 5.75 | 1.271          |
| TOTAL PSS         | 5.54 | 1.132          |
| RESILIENCE        | 3.27 | .665           |

( $n=116$ ;  $f=65$ ,  $m=51$ )

The mean scores for perceived social support from friends, family, significant other and total perceived social support indicate the majority of the sample group is having high perceived social support. Similar results are observed in a study by Talwar and Mohd Fadzil (2013) where means for total scale is 5.33, support from family is 5.76, friends is 5.00 and significant other is 4.99. Perceived social support from friends indicated by a mean score of 5.75 is comparatively higher than perceived social support from family and significant other. As the perception of social support varies according to the developmental stage of life, individuals during late adolescence and early adulthood tend to spend more time with their friends compared to a family they perceive more support from friends. Also in this period, they believe that friends understand them more than their family which is reflected in their perception of support. The mean score of resilience (3.27) shows normal resiliency as interpreted from the norms of the Brief Resilience Scale indicating that most of the participants have normal resiliency levels. Nancy Ahern (2007) has also observed medium level resiliency where mean score was 139.8 among college students while the mean score showed slightly high resiliency in female students compared to male students.

**Table 2: Table showing correlation between total Perceived Social Support, social support from friends, family, significant other, and Resilience**

| Variables                      | Pearson (r) | Sig. (2-tailed) |
|--------------------------------|-------------|-----------------|
| Total Perceived Social Support | .232*       | .012            |
| Significant other              | .191*       | .040            |
| Family                         | .149        | .110            |
| Friends                        | .188*       | .044            |

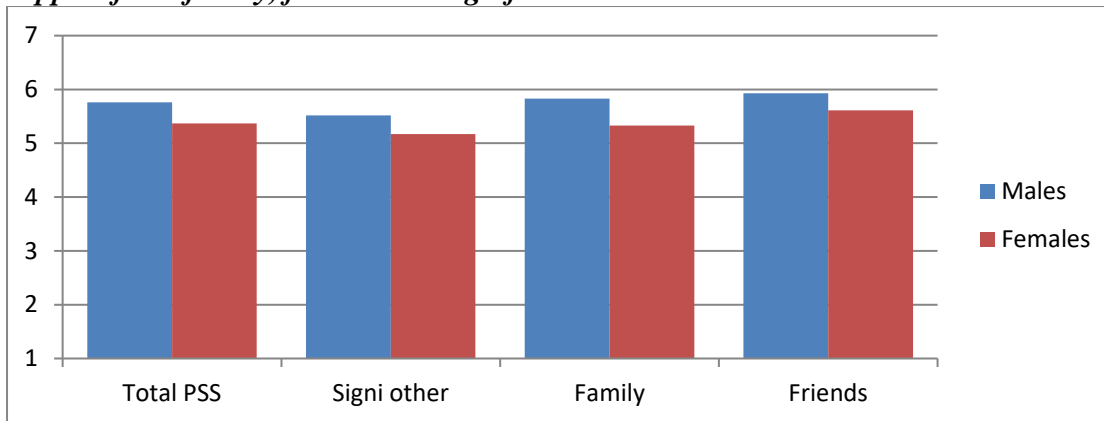
( $n=116$ ;  $f=65$ ,  $m=51$ )

As observed from the table two showing the Pearson correlation there is a significant positive correlation (at 0.05 levels) between total perceived social support, support from significant other, and friends with resilience. Students in the present sample group perceiving higher social support from friends and significant other tend to be more resilient

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meaning they have more strength and better coping when faced with challenges. It is also observed in the table that social support from family is not significantly correlated with resilience. This means that perceiving support from family is not contributing to resilience in the present sample group. Hence, the first hypothesis stating that there is no relationship between perceived social support and resilience is rejected while the second hypothesis that there is no relationship between perceived social support from friends, family, and significant other is partially accepted as there is no significant correlation found between perceived social support from family and resilience.

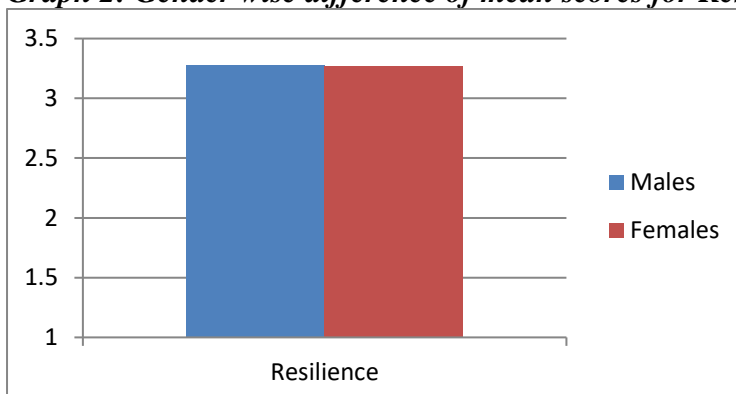
**Graph 1: Gender wise difference of mean scores for total perceived social support, support from family, friends and significant.**



( $n=116$ ;  $f=65$ ,  $m=51$ )

The above graph showing means for total perceived social support (males-5.76, females-5.37), perceived social support from friends (males-5.93, females-5.61), family (males-5.83, females-5.33) and significant other (males-5.52, females-5.17) in context to gender does not indicate noticeable difference in the support perceived by male and female participants of the present study. Overall observation shows that mean for female's perceived social support from all three sources is slightly lower as compared to perceived social support by males. Simon and Dong (2014) found that among Chinese population females perceived more support from friends and family while males perceived more support from spouse. Another study showed females perceived high social support from significant other while males perceived more overall support and support from friends compared to females. (Soman, et al). Perception of social support is very subjective and qualitative aspect and depends on the type of social resources a person has. Therefore, it is understandable to have slight mean differences for perceived social support of males and females.

**Graph 2: Gender wise difference of mean scores for Resilience**



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Gender is one of the important factors influencing the way one faces and manages stress in life which means there could be difference in the resilience levels of males and females. Similar to the Perceived Social Support there is no significant difference observed in the resilience of male and female participants as observed from graph number two. Here the mean score of resilience for males is 3.28 while for females is 3.27 which signifies no difference in the resilience level of male and female participants.

**Table 3: Table showing gender difference for Perceived Social Support and Resilience using t-test.**

|                   |                             | Levene's Test for Equality of Variances |        | t-test for Equality of Means |                 |                 |                       |
|-------------------|-----------------------------|---|--------|------------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------------|
|                   |                             | F                                       | t      | df                           | Sig. (2-tailed) | Mean Difference | Std. Error Difference |
| TOTALPSS          | Equal variances assumed     | .792                                    | -1.850 | 114                          | .067            | -.388           | .210                  |
|                   | Equal variances not assumed |   | -1.877 | 112.136                      | .063            | -.388           | .207                  |
| SIGNIFICANT OTHER | Equal variances assumed     | .059                                    | -1.065 | 114                          | .289            | -.347           | .325                  |
|                   | Equal variances not assumed |   | -1.067 | 107.983                      | .289            | -.347           | .325                  |
| FAMILY            | Equal variances assumed     | 1.041                                   | -1.845 | 114                          | .068            | -.498           | .270                  |
|                   | Equal variances not assumed |   | -1.859 | 110.227                      | .066            | -.498           | .268                  |
| FRIENDS           | Equal variances assumed     | 6.818                                   | -1.350 | 114                          | .180            | -.320           | .237                  |
|                   | Equal variances not assumed |   | -1.400 | 113.535                      | .164            | -.320           | .228                  |
| RESILIENCE        | Equal variances assumed     | .000                                    | -.145  | 114                          | .885            | -.018           | .125                  |
|                   | Equal variances not assumed |   | -.145  | 107.547                      | .885            | -.018           | .125                  |

Results of the t-test conducted to further analyse gender differences for total perceived social support, perceived social support from family, friends and significant other and resilience show no significant gender difference for any variable. These findings are supported by Banerjee, et al. which reported no significant relationship between gender and resilience levels. Considering the age group and family backgrounds of participants the hypothesis that

there will be no significant difference in total perceived social support, perceived social support from friends, family, and significant other and resilience with context to gender was formed. The participants were students of elite colleges and from the privileged environment, where both the genders are treated equally and there is no discrimination observed for them. Due to a similar environment and healthy upbringing for both girls and boys, it is expected that there is no difference in the level of perceived social support, and resilience among males and females. A study by Erdogan, et al (2015) showed males having more resilience as compared to females in a similar age group. But the sample group was of Turkish students and Turkish society is a man dominated society hence the men have more powers and thus more capacity to face the hardships. Various studies across the age groups have shown gender difference for perceived social support and also the differences in support from family, friends and significant other. But the results of the present study can be explained as the participants come from a background where both males and females are assumed to be treated equally and hence, there is no gender difference found in perceived social support and resilience.

The present group of students come from a well to do financial, educational, and social background in which they are the princes and princesses of their house so they are always supported and cared by their families and because of their social background they also perceive friends to be very supportive, while in this age group most of them would be in a relationship due to which their perceived social support from significant other is also good. For many, during college life the bond with family might decrease due to more involvement in college and friends. Also during this age the generation gap is experienced which creates hesitation to share or seek help from parents. These above factors explain the cause how total perceived social support from friends and significant other is significantly and positively related to resilience. In other words, the more social support perceived by students, more the capacity to deal and overcome challenging situations. As explained resilience is the ability to bounce back, to overcome the stressful life events and during stress perceived or received support gives confidence and strength to cope with the challenge. In the present study only, the perceived social support is measured which shows that participants perceive social support from friends and significant other if faced with stressful life events. But there is a possibility that they might receive more support from family compared to friends and significant other when faced with difficulty. Further, it is recommended to study received social support and resilience in similar age group, and it is also suggested to compare received and perceived social support.

### ***Implications***

Findings of the present study indicate that perceived social support is an important resource for resilience among individuals. Thus, the knowledge obtained from this study can be implicated in organising individual as well as group counselling sessions for students and parents. Through these sessions the gap between parents and students' understanding can be reduced. In the pandemic times where face to face meeting is not possible yet the support is must as it is one of the factors contributing to resilience and resilience is required to bounce back from the effects of COVID-19, so online support groups, counselling sessions can be organized. Other than counselling, support groups can be started where students can come and talk freely about their issues, this will lead to more perceived support and the resiliency level as well. Such groups will give a feeling of belongingness, facilitate students in finding help when required thus, increasing capacity to cope with stressful life events.



## CONCLUSION

The findings of the present study show that there is a significant positive relationship between total perceived social support, perceived social support from friends and significant other with resilience. Also, there is no gender difference in context to perceived social support and resilience. Hence, it can be concluded that for resilience building perceived social support can be considered as an important factor and the resilience building programs should also focus on individual's social resources such as social support.

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### **Conflict of Interest**

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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