

Research Paper

Sense of Belongingness and Mental Well-being: The Mediating Role of Perceived Social Support among College Students from Tea Plantation Communities

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ABSTRACT

Higher education constitutes a vital route for social advancement among marginalized youth. This study examines the mediating role of social support on the relationship between sense of belongingness and mental well-being among college students of tea plantation communities in Kerala, India. A cross-sectional study is adopted in this research. Sample comprises of 200 college students (133 males, 67 females) from tea plantation communities. Participants represented different academic levels including undergraduate (66.5%), postgraduate (30.0%), and doctoral (3.5%) across multiple institutions. Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale ($\alpha = .91$), Psychological Sense of School Membership Scale ($\alpha = .89$) and Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support ($\alpha = .93$) are used to collect the relevant data. Hayes' approach with 5,000 bootstrap re-samples is used in the mediation analysis. The result revealed that, there is moderate to high level scores on all three constructs among participants: Sense of belongingness ($M = 52.40$, $SD = 4.23$), mental well-being ($M = 37.06$, $SD = 2.52$), and perceived social support ($M = 31.16$, $SD = 3.75$) and also very strong positive correlation exists between all three variables ($r = .851-.917$, $p < .001$). Additionally, sense of belongingness significantly predicts mental well-being ($\beta = 0.538$, $p < .001$) and perceived social support ($\beta = 0.814$, $p < .001$). Bootstrap analysis confirms there is a significant indirect effect of mediation = 0.085, 95% CI [0.019, 0.185]. Perceived social support significantly mediates 15.8% of the total effect. The study concludes that, Perceived social support significantly mediate the relationship between Sense of belongingness and Mental well-being among college students of tea plantation communities. The study also highlights the importance of academic related interventions supporting marginalized college students.

Keywords: *Sense of Belongingness, Mental Well-Being, Perceived Social Support, Tea Plantation, College Students*

The tea industry is one of the largest private sectors in Kerala, India. However, the situation of these communities is similar to that in other states. The key issue affecting their mental well-being is poverty. Most lack homeownership. They live in small houses provided by tea plantation companies, called 'Layam'(Moitra et al., 2016;

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Rajbangshi & Nambiar, 2020). Workplace exploitation, especially of historically marginalized groups such as women and Dalits, also significantly impacts their mental well-being (Raj, 2020; Rajbangshi & Nambiar, 2020). Furthermore, limited healthcare access and social isolation significantly impact their mental well-being (Rahna et al., 2024; Raj, 2020). While these obstacles are prevalent among tea plantation communities, young adults pursuing higher education face unique challenges that reveal both their vulnerability and resilience.

Higher education constitutes a vital route for social advancement among marginalized youth. However, the shift to college faces unique academic and psychological challenges for first generation students from tea plantation communities. These students face Psychological challenges include heightened anxiety, stress, and depression due to conflicts between academic demands and their interdependent cultural norms (Chang et al., 2020; Phillips et al., 2020), Imposter syndrome and self-doubt are major concerns among them (Pan & Zhang, 2025; Wildhagen, 2022). Additionally, they face academic challenges including lower readiness and performance, as well as financial and institutional barriers such as limited knowledge of academic resources, which hinder success (Eveland, 2020; Ko et al., 2025; Musawar & Zulfiqar, 2025; Watts et al., 2023; Weisen et al., 2024). Within the higher educational context, several studies showed that sense of belongingness has a crucial part of academic and psychological outcomes (Chang et al., 2020; Phillips et al., 2020).

Senses of belonging and social connection are the fundamental Root cause of psychological adjustment issues faced by college students of marginalized communities (Arday, 2018; Burke & Park-Taylor, 2022; Thiem & Dasgupta, 2022). Sense of belonging defined as individual's subjective feeling of deep connections, respects and values towards physical place, social group and experiences. It is a fundamental human need and also a major predictor of mental well-being among different populations especially marginalized peoples. It is a fundamental human need (Allen et al., 2021). In the educational context, it is defined as the feeling of deep connection of individual toward the institute, members in the classroom which is formed by institutional support and the social acceptance on the side of institutional and class room members. Several studies found that sense of belongingness is positively associated with various mental well-being indicators such as life satisfaction, psychological resilience and happiness (Avcı, 2023; Romeo et al., 2024; Samadieh & Rezaei, 2024; P. Song et al., 2024; Ul Hasan, 2021). On the other hand, college students with lower sense of belongingness experience higher dropout intentions, lower academic satisfaction and increased risk of depression, especially among students from marginalized communities (Gopalan et al., 2022; Pedler et al., 2022).

The relationship between sense of belongingness and mental well-being is likely to mediate by various psychological mechanisms, perceived social support emerge as a major mediator among them. According to (An et al., 2024) social support theory defined as good connection with others offer emotional, practical and information based resources that act against negative effects such as stress and enhance positive psychological well-being. The multidimensional nature of the social support comprises support from family, friends and others, each of them contribute psychological well-being uniquely. Research revealed that individual with high social support experience higher life satisfaction, better psychological adjustments and less stress compared to others (An et al., 2024; Wickramaratne et al., 2022; Zell & Stockus, 2025).

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Social support plays multiple functions in the context of higher education among college students; it may contribute in the relationship between sense of belongingness and mental well-being (An et al., 2024a). Students with stronger belongingness develop broader social networks with peers and faculty, providing academic, emotional, and social integration support that enhances psychological adjustment. (Bender et al., 2019; Rahul R et al., 2025; C. Song et al., 2019; Xin, 2022). Students from marginalized communities, social support play a pivotal role for dealing with cultural transition overcoming social discrimination and sustaining connection to the community which they belong during the time of education (Danvers & Hinton-Smith, 2024; Kadenhe et al., 2025; Soria, 2023). Limited studies examine this mediation relationship among college students from tea plantation communities.

The growing recognition of the importance of social support and sense of well-being among college students of marginalized communities, there is significant gap occurs to understand this process in college students of tea plantation communities. The uniqueness of this research is the population, the cultural, historical, socio economical context of tea plantation communities suggest that there experience may entirely different from other marginalized groups. This justifies that the particular topic needed special attention. Further, there are tons of studies revealed the direct relationship between sense of belongingness and mental well-being. But the mediating role of social support is an underexplored area, particularly in the developing nations.

This study trying to figure out these gaps by finding out the relationship between sense of belongingness, social support and mental well-being among college students of tea plantation communities the state of Kerala, India. The current study mainly focused on the mediation effect of social support on the belongings and mental well-being relationship. The study mainly highlights the positive side of the mental well-being rather than psychopathological side. By taking this perspective is important especially a marginalized population like tea plantation community, because it avoids stigmatization and also recognizing the potentially modifiable factors that foster positive mental outcomes

THEORETICAL FRAME WORK

The theoretical frame work model of this study to explain the mediation relationship is the integration of two theories. One is the Self determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 1985) and the other is Social Support Theory (Cohen & Wills, 1985). Self determination theory is defined as relatedness is considers one of the basic psychological need and it enhances intrinsic motivation through that promote psychological well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Sense of belongingness is the attainment of this basic psychological need in the educational context. On the other hand, Social support theory defined the mechanism behind how belonging influence mental well-being. It explains how social connections promote psychological well-being (Cohen & Wills, 1985). By integrating these two perspectives, the study proposes that student who experience stronger sense of belongingness in their academic environment will develop stronger social support network connections, which in turn will promote mental well-being among students.

METHODS

Objectives

The main objective of the study is to identify the mediating role of perceived social support on the relationship between sense of belongingness and mental well-being among college

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students of tea plantation communities. Additionally, the study also attempts to explore the direct relationship between these variables and examine the demographic factors which influence these relationships.

Hypothesis

- There will be a significant influence of sense of belongingness on mental well-being among college students of tea plantation communities in Kerala.
- There will be a significant influence of sense of belongingness on perceived social support among college students of tea plantation communities in Kerala.
- There will be a significant influence of mental well-being on perceived social support among college students of tea plantation communities in Kerala
- There will be a significant mediation role of perceived social support on the relationship between sense of belongingness and mental well-being among college students of tea plantation communities in Kerala

Research Design

The presented study followed a cross-sectional quantitative research design to understand the mediation role perceived social support on the relationship between sense of belongingness and mental well-being among college students of tea plantation communities in Kerala, India.

Participants

The population comprises of 200 (100 male & 100 female) college students aged 18-25 year from tea plantation communities enrolled in undergraduate, postgraduate program across the state especially in the Idukki Districts were most of the tea plantation communities are located. Participants were selected using stratified random sampling method from various colleges across the states.

Inclusion Criteria

The followings criteria are used to include the participants in the present study.

- Students belong to tea plantation communities.
- Students are admitted as a full-time college student.
- Students are between 18-25 age.
- Students are belongs to Kerala.

Exclusion Criteria

- Students belongs to non- tea plantation background.
- Students have diagnosed with severe mental disorders
- Students with speech impairment

Materials

- **Demographic Questionnaire:** A self reported questionnaire was developed collect demographic data include, name, age, gender, Tea plantation company they belongs to.
- **Psychological Sense of School Membership Scale:** The scale is developed by Goodenow in 1953. It also known as sense belongingness scale (SOBI). It was used to find out sense of belongings among college students. This is a 5 point likert scale consist of 18 items ranging from 5 (completely true) to 1 (not all to). Higher score

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indicate strong sense of belongings. The scale has high internal consistency and constructs validity ($r=0.77-88$).

- **The Warwick–Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale (WEMWBS):** The scale is used to find out the mental well-being among college students developed by researchers at the Universities of Warwick and Edinburgh. The scale consists of 14 items and scored 1-5 likert scale. The minimum score is 14 and maximum is 70. The scale shows high internal consistency ($\alpha =0.89$), test – retest reliability (0.83) and high construct validity.
- **Multi-dimensional scale for perceived social support:** The perceived social support is measured using this scale developed by Zimet et al. (1988). The scale consists of 12 item scored ranging from ‘very strongly disagree’ to ‘very strongly agree’ from 7 point liker scale. The scale shows high construct validity and excellent reliability ($\alpha = 0.88-0.94$).

Data collection

The data collected in a hybrid mode (online and offline) among the tea plantation college students. In an online mode Google form with four materials is given to those students who are not approaching easily due to distance and asked to fill out the form. Informed consents are asked to the participants in a check box format before filling the form. Questionnaire directly administered to students who are easily approachable.

Variables

Independent variable

Sense of belongingness: Refers to the subjective experience of students being in the part of academic environment. It is continuous variable measured using Sense of belongingness scale (SOBI) by Goodenow in 1953.

Dependent Variable

Mental well-being: Refers to positive mental health, psychological functioning and subjective mental wellness. It is a continuous variable measured using The Warwick–Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale (WEMWBS).

Mediator Variable

Perceived social support: Refers to subjective experience of students that they have the availability and adequacy of support from family, friends, and significant others. It is continuous variable measured using Multi-dimensional scale for perceived social support (MSPSS) by Zimet et al.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Descriptive statistics

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics of all the variables of the participants. From the table, the mean value of all the constructs indicates moderate to high level. Mean value of sense of belongingness among participants was found to be 52.40 with the standard deviation 4.226 out of a possible range 18-90, indicate that moderate level of sense of belongingness among participants within the educational environment. The mean value of mental well-being among participant found to be 37.07 with the standard deviation 2.520 out of the possible range of (14-70), which indicate the level of mental well-being among participants, is above–average. Further, the mean value of perceived social support among college students of tea plantation communities found to be 31.17 with the standard deviation

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3.752 out of all the possible range of 12-84, indicating participant experience moderate level of social support from the family friends and significant others.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics and Pearson's Correlation between Sense of belongingness, Perceived social support and Mental well-being among college students of tea plantation communities.

Variables	Mean	Standard Deviation	1	2	3
1. Sense of Belongingness	52.40	4.226	1.00		
2. Perceived Social Support	31.17	3.752	.917**	1.00	
3. Mental Wellbeing	37.07	2.520	.902**	.851**	1.00

***. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).*

Correlation

From the table, the correlation between all three variables found to be strong, positive and significant. The correlation between sense of belongingness with perceived social support found to be ($r = .917, p < .001$) and with mental well-being ($r = .902, p < .001$) which indicate there is a significant strong positive correlation between variables. Additionally, the study also finds that there is a significant strong positive correlation between perceived social support and mental well-being among participants ($r = .851, p < .001$).

Mediation analysis

The main research objective was tested using the mediation analysis using the Hayes' (2017) approach with the bootstrapping procedure. The study was analyzed whether the perceived social support mediate the relationship between sense of belongingness and mental well-being among college students of tea plantation communities.

Table 2

Path	Coefficient	SE	t	p	95% CI
a (SOBI → MSPSS)	0.8138	0.0251	32.41	< .001	—
b (MSPSS → WEMWBS)	0.1045	0.0433	2.41	.017	—
c (SOBI → WEMWBS)	0.5377	0.0182	29.47	< .001	—
c' (SOBI → WEMWBS)	0.4526	0.0259	17.50	< .001	—
c' (SOBI → WEMWBS)	0.0851	0.0423	—	—	[0.0191, 0.1853]

Influence of sense of belongingness on mental well-being

From the table, the regression value of sense of belongingness on well-being was found to be $\beta = 0.5377, t(198) = 29.47, p < .001$, which is significant. Sense of belongingness significantly predicts mental well-being among participants. The ($R^2 = .813$) which 81.3 % of variance in mental well-being. This found to be a strong association. Thus, the hypothesis says that “*There will be a significant influence of sense of belongingness on mental well-being among college students of tea plantation communities in Kerala.*” is accepted.

Influence of sense of belongingness on perceived social support

The table shows the regression value of sense of belongingness on perceived social support was found to be $\beta = 0.8138, t(198) = 32.41, p < .001$. This demonstrates significant. This means, sense of belongingness significantly predicts the influence of perceived social support among college students of tea plantation communities. The ($R^2 = .840$) indicates,

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84% of variance in perceived social support. Thus, the hypothesis says that “*There will be a significant influence of sense of belongingness on perceived social support among college students of tea plantation communities in Kerala.*” is accepted.

Influence of sense of belongingness and perceived social support on mental well-being

In the full mediation model, use both variables sense of belongingness and perceived social support together to explain mental well-being. Both predictors remained statistically significant. The influence of perceived social support on mental well-being was found to be significant $\beta = 0.1045$, $t(197) = 2.41$, $p = .017$, which indicates that higher social support from the family and living environment is significantly associated with better mental well-being while controlling sense of belongingness among participants. The direct influence of sense of belongingness on mental well-being is remain significant $\beta = 0.4526$, $t(197) = 17.50$, $p < .001$, but reduced from the total effect. The full model explained 81.7% variance in mental well-being among participants ($R^2 = .817$). Thus, the hypothesis says that “*There will be a significant influence of mental well-being on perceived social support among college students of tea plantation communities in Kerala.*” is accepted.

Influence of sense of belongingness on mental well-being through perceived social support

Using the bootstrap mediation analysis with 5000 re-samples found that, there is a significant indirect effect of sense of belongingness on mental well-being through perceived social support 0.0851 (SE = 0.0423). The 95% confidence interval shows [0.0191-0.1853]. This clearly indicates that, the value does not cross the value zero. So, the mediation is statistically significant. The variance explain on the effect of sense of belongingness on mental well-being through perceived social support was found to be 15.8%. This demonstrates partial mediation. This indicated that, sense of belongingness is directly and indirectly influence mental well-being through its effect on perceived social support. Thus, the hypothesis says that, “*there will be a significant mediation role of perceived social support on the relationship between sense of belongingness and mental well-being among college students of tea plantation communities in Kerala*” is accepted.

DISCUSSION

The present study tries to explore the mediating role of perceived social support on the relationship between sense of belongingness and mental well-being among college students of tea plantation communities in Kerala, India. The study finds a significant mediation. The key findings are discussed below.

Direct relationship

The study found strong association between sense of belongingness and well-being among college students. This aligns with several studies indicating the importance of belongingness and psychological well-being (Dutcher et al., 2022; Gopalan et al., 2022; Gopalan & Brady, 2020). Students from tea plantation communities may experience acculturative stress, economic challenges and potential discrimination, the acceptance and adapting to the new environment is crucial for their well-being.

The study also found strong relationship between sense of belongingness and perceived social support. This indicates that, students who feel more acceptable in their educational environment have a tendency to develop social connections with peers and staffs. For college students of tea plantation communities who may initially feel acculturative stress and

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uncertain about the new environment, developing strong sense of belongingness is act as a gateway to institutional support system.

The study found a significant association between perceived social support and mental well-being. Compare to other relationships, it is more modest in magnitude. The findings confirm existing research works that social support play a crucial role in mental health (Choenarom et al., 2005; Cohen & Wills, 1985; C. Song et al., 2019). The relationship between these two variables remains significant, even when controlling the sense of belongingness variable, indicating the unique contribution of social support variable in the mental well-being out comes.

Mediation Analysis

The significance of mediation analysis in the hypothesis 4 provides valuable insight in the underlying mechanism in the relationship between Sense of belongingness through mental well-being. The present study revealed that 15.8% of the total effect operated through perceived social support. This means the sense of belongingness foster well-being partially through developing social connections. This partial model demonstrates multiple pathway nature of link between sense of belongingness and mental well-being that consistent with the complex theoretical models of psychological adjustment.

The mediation model also recognize social support theory suggesting that social connections reduce stress and promote positive outcomes (Hagerty & Williams, 1999). For students who experience cultural, poverty and identity related challenges in the academic settings, the social resources they are gained through belongingness may enhance to get institutional & peer related support in the academic environment and that directly contribute mental well-being among them.

Additionally, the partial model also suggest that, there are other factors which also contribute the sense of belongingness and well-being relationship other than perceived social support. This may include resilience, self efficacy or may academic integration. Exploring these areas may contribute more comprehensive model in the belongingness mental well-being relationship in the future research.

CONCLUSION

The present study examined the relationship between sense of belongingness, perceived social support and mental well-being. The findings revealed that Perceived social support mediate partially in the relationship between sense of belongingness and mental well-being among college students of tea plantation communities. Additionally, the study also finds out significant strong association between these three variables. The study highlighted the importance of promoting sense of belongingness act as a gateway to enhance social support and improve well-being among college students of tea plantation communities.

Implications

Intervention Programs

The study revealed the importance of fostering sense of belongingness. So, conducting intervention programs to promote belongingness is necessary. This may include

- Structured peer monitoring program: Connect an existing old student from tea plantation background to the newly joined student.

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- Faculty-student initiative programs: It will also help students the feel that I am also the part of this environment.
- Community-based support programs: This help to maintain relations to the communities.
- Financial and academic support services: This promotes support mechanism while addressing the economic barrier.

Institutional and governmental Policy Implications

- To students who are belongs to tea plantation communities provide special recruitment programs
- Infrastructure support to feel belongingness
- Government initiate Scholarships for students belong to tea plantation communities for their higher education.

Limitation

- A cross-sectional research design is used in this research, it prevents causal relationship.
- Self-reported measures are used as a tool in this study, which may contributed to subjective bias.
- Convenient sampling method is used to select sample, which may reduce generalizability.
- Focus on positive aspects that provide only one perspective side of mental health outcomes.

Future Direction

- A longitudinal research approach may provide stronger evidence for mediation effect.
- Intervention based study could be conducted to understand well-being based interventions have an effect.
- Comparative studies could be conducted to understand the mediation model works at different marginalized populations.
- There could be a scope of adding additional mediator variables along with perceived social support to understand the effect in the mediation on the belongingness – mental well-being relationship.

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Conflict of Interest

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