

Research Paper

Stress among Undergraduate Students: A Bibliometric Analysis and Systematic Mapping of Global Research Trends (2016–2026)

Surajit Mahato^{1*}, Subir Sen²

ABSTRACT

Psychological stress among undergraduate students has become one of the most extensively explored topics in the social sciences as well as science, driven by growing concern over student mental health, academic pressure, and the disruptive effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on higher education. The global scientific literature on stress among undergraduate students published between 2016 and 2026 is systematically and bibliometrically analyzed in this study. In accordance with the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA 2020) recommendations (Page et al., 2021), a structured search was conducted in the Scopus database using the Boolean string TITLE-ABS-KEY(stress OR “psychological stress” OR “perceived stress”) AND TITLE-ABS-KEY(undergraduate OR “undergraduate student “ OR “college student “ OR “higher education student”), restricted to English-language journal articles in the Social Sciences subject area published in final form between 2016 and 2026. After meeting the eligibility requirements, 2,829 papers from 847 sources were kept for further examination. Co-citation and keyword co-occurrence networks were created using VOSviewer (van Eck & Waltman, 2010), and bibliometric indicators were calculated using the bibliometrix R-package and its Biblioshiny online interface (Aria & Cuccurullo, 2017). The literature showed robust growth, with an annual growth rate of 6.81%. A life-cycle model suggests that the field has reached a maturity phase, with an estimated 61.8% progress toward saturation and a modelled peak of 348 publications annually around 2024. The United States topped scientific productivity and citation impact (18,635 citations), followed by China and the United Kingdom, while the University of California emerged as the most productive affiliate (59 papers).

Keywords: *Academic Stress, Psychological Stress, Undergraduate Students, Bibliometric Analysis, PRISMA*

Stress is arguably the most researched psychosocial construct in the context of higher education as there is a long-standing awareness of the significant burden imposed on students in terms of their cognitive, emotional and physiological systems when entering and navigating their way through university experience. Following the definition of stress proposed by Lazarus and Folkman within the framework of the transactional model

¹Research Scholar, Department of Education, Sidho-Kanho-Birsha University Purulia, West Bengal.
<https://orcid.org/0009-0008-9922-2290>

²Associate Professor, Department of Education, Sidho-Kanho-Birsha University Purulia, West Bengal.
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3620-4019>

*Corresponding Author

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where stress is viewed as a dynamic process involving the relationship between the environmental demands and the individual's evaluation of, and coping with, these demands (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), the construct of stress and such related concepts as self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997) and self-esteem (Rosenberg, 1965) were used quite often to investigate the process of students' adjustment, well-being and performance.

The interest to this research topic has considerably increased in connection with the outbreak of the novel coronavirus pandemic which radically changed the conditions of delivering undergraduate education and prompted a series of studies devoted to increased anxiety, depression and psychological distress experienced by the college population (Cao et al., 2020; Son et al., 2020). Earlier studies have shown that a substantial number of university students experience high levels of depression, anxiety, and stress (Beiter et al., 2015), demonstrating that the mental well-being of university students was an urgent issue before the emergence of the pandemic. The combination of these longstanding and newly emerging issues has led to the development of a broad, dispersed, and constantly growing body of research which covers psychology, education, nursing, medicine, and public health.

Due to the complexity and dispersion of the existing literature on the topic, traditional narrative reviews are inadequate for depicting large-scale trends such as the dynamics of the publication process, geographic clustering of knowledge generation, changes in major issues, and the intellectual framework linking core theories, measures, and findings.

A bibliometric analysis, defined as an analytical approach to examining scientific output, impact, and structure quantitatively (Donthu et al., 2021; Ellegaard & Wallin, 2015), presents a supplementary perspective on systematic reviews that allows for the examination of “what has been studied, by whom, where, and how” in an expansive way (Zupic & Cater, 2015). In combination with the openness provided by the PRISMA 2020 guidelines (Page et al., 2021), a bibliometric systematic review may become a solid and reproducible synthesis of scientific literature of a particular field.

This paper attempts to fill this gap by performing a comprehensive bibliometric review of all Scopus-indexed literature on stress among undergraduate students from 2016 to 2026. The questions that the study seeks to answer are as follows:

1. What is the volume of scientific output on this topic, its development trend, and maturity level?
2. Who is the primary contributor to this body of knowledge, from which countries and institutions, and how much collaboration takes place internationally?
3. What are the key terms and themes that define this field of study?
4. What classic theory and methodology works support the intellectual infrastructure of this research domain, according to co-citation analysis?

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Study Design and Reporting Standard

This study utilized a bibliometric systematic review methodology that combined the use of scientometric methods with transparent procedures for identification, screening and selection according to the PRISMA 2020 guidelines (Page et al., 2021). Bibliometric indicators and networks were created via the use of the bibliometrix R-package and its visualization interface, biblioshiny (Aria & Cuccurullo, 2017), together with VOSviewer software for co-citations and keyword co-occurrences (van Eck & Waltman, 2010).

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Data Source and Search Strategy

The Scopus database was selected as the sole data source because of its broad multidisciplinary coverage, standardised metadata, and suitability for large-scale bibliometric analysis. The search was executed using the following Boolean search string, applied to the title, abstract, and keyword fields:

(TITLE-ABS-KEY (stress OR “psychological stress” OR “perceived stress”) AND TITLE-ABS-KEY (undergraduate OR “undergraduate student*” OR “college student*” OR “higher education student*”))*

The search was limited by the following filters: date range 2016 – 2026; publication status set to “Final”; language limited to English; discipline limited to Social Sciences; and document type limited to “Article”, hence removing all other document types including proceedings papers, reviews, book chapters, editorials, etc. The search was performed in July 2026.

Eligibility Criteria and Study Selection Process

The eligibility criteria were used directly within the search strategy, reflecting database-oriented bibliometric review methodology. The studies needed to (a) include the particular terms related to stress and college students in the title, abstract, or keywords; (b) be presented as a peer-reviewed journal paper; (c) be classified under the Social Sciences subject area; (d) be published in English; and (e) achieve their final publication stage within the period from 2016 to 2026. No further screening based on the additional criteria was performed, since the search string and the filters reflected the inclusion criteria for the systematic review directly. The whole identification and screening process is visualized using the PRISMA flow chart (Figure 1).

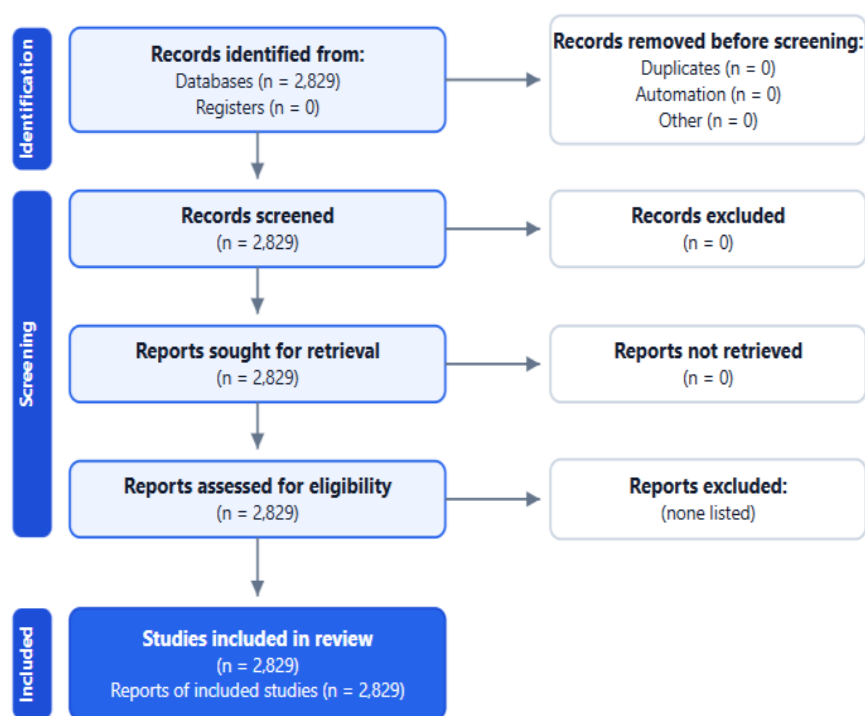


Figure 1. PRISMA 2020 flow diagram of the identification and inclusion of records.

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As shown in Figure 1, the initial Scopus search identified 2,829 records, with no additional records identified from registers. No records were removed prior to screening (duplicates = 0; automation-based exclusions = 0; other reasons = 0), reflecting the use of a single, pre-filtered database query. All 2,829 records were screened, and all were subsequently sought for retrieval, assessed for eligibility, and included in the final review, yielding a final corpus of 2,829 documents.

Data Extraction and Analytical Procedure

Metadata from bibliometric fields such as authors, author affiliations, countries of author affiliation, source titles, publication years, citation counts, author keywords and cited references were extracted from Scopus and saved in a format that could be easily read by bibliometrix. The various kinds of analysis done are: (a) descriptive bibliometric metrics (count of documents, sources, authors and co-authorship indices); (b) annual scientific output and life-cycle/growth curve analysis to determine the current stage of maturity of the field; (c) source dispersion analysis using Bradford's law of scattering; (d) citation-based metrics (average citations per year and most cited countries); (e) geographical and institutional productivity analysis, which included classification of corresponding-author countries into SCPs and MCPs; (f) keyword frequency analysis (word clouds, treemaps and word frequency over time); (g) visualization of the conceptual structure of the field through Multiple Correspondence Analysis (MCA); (h) Sankey plot between three fields (cited references, authors and author keywords) to trace the theme lineage and (i) co-citation network analysis to find clusters of intellectually connected high citations articles. Network visualizations were done using VOSviewer with default settings for normalizations and clustering.

RESULTS

General Overview of the Dataset

The final dataset consisted of 2,829 publications that appeared from 2016 to 2026 through 847 different sources and involved 9,996 authors, 242 of whom produced single-author publications. The corpus showed the annual growth rate of 6.81%, the average age of the publication of 4.08 years, and the average number of citations per publication of 15.68. Author collaboration was illustrated by the ratio of co-authors per publication, which was equal to 4.01, while international collaboration was relatively low and amounted to 15.52%. The dataset included 6,154 author keywords and had 128,960 cited references.

Table 1. Main information about the bibliometric dataset.

Indicator	Value
Timespan	2016–2026
Sources (journals, books, etc.)	847
Documents	2,829
Annual growth rate (%)	6.81
Document average age (years)	4.08
Average citations per document	15.68
References	128,960
Author's keywords (DE)	6,154
Authors	9,996
Authors of single-authored documents	242
Co-authors per document	4.01
International co-authorship (%)	15.52

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Figure 2. Summary dashboard of the main bibliometric indicators (2016–2026).

Annual Scientific Production and Life-Cycle Analysis

Annual production grew rapidly from around 120 papers in 2015-2016 to a peak of 348 papers annually, according to the modeled data, with 2023.9 identified as the inflection/peak point of the life cycle (Figure 3). The logistic model obtained a fairly good fit ($R^2 = 0.746$; RMSE = 47.78; AIC = 91.1; BIC = 92.3), with an estimate of the saturation level (K) equal to 4,579 cumulative papers and duration of growth (Δt) equal to 14.4 years. At the time of the last complete observation (2026), there were 2,828 cumulative papers in the field (228 papers in the last year), which represents 61.8% completion of the saturation stage - placing the topic at the maturity stage, when growth slows down but does not reverse (Figure 4; Table 2).

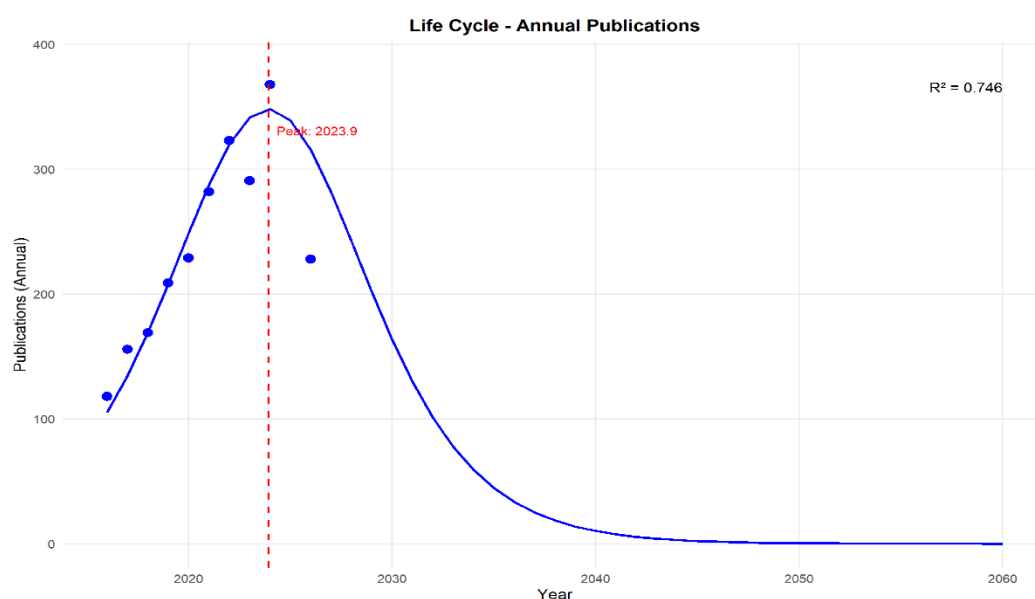


Figure 3. Life-cycle curve of annual publications on undergraduate student stress (2016–2026, with logistic projection to 2060).

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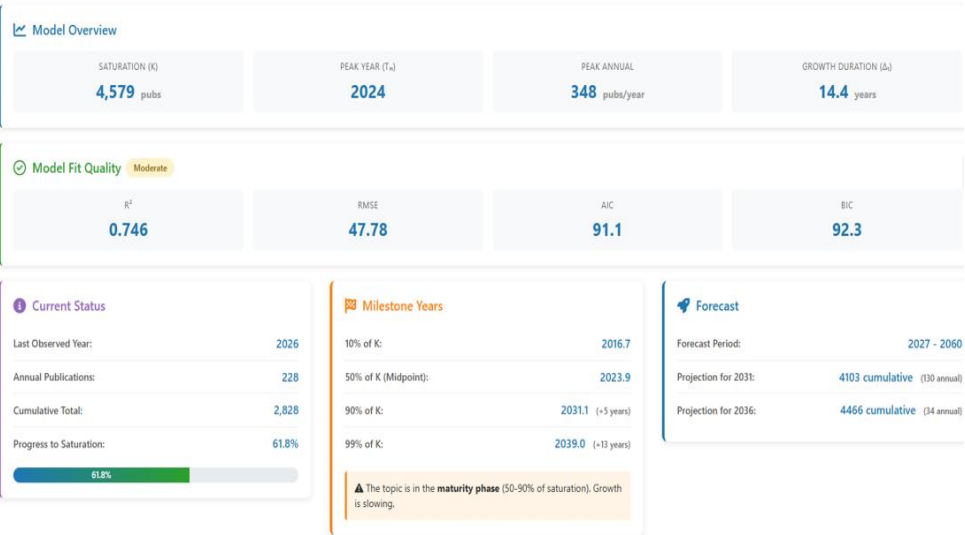


Figure 4. Growth-model overview: saturation, peak year, milestone years, and forecast indicators.

Table 2. Parameters of the fitted life-cycle (logistic growth) model.

Growth-model parameter	Value
Saturation (K)	4,579 publications
Peak year (Tm)	2024
Peak annual output	348 publications/year
Growth duration (Δt)	14.4 years
Model fit (R²)	0.746 (moderate)
10% of K reached	2016.7
50% of K / midpoint	2023.9
90% of K (projected)	2031.1 (+5 years)
99% of K (projected)	2039.0 (+13 years)
Progress to saturation (2026)	61.8%

Source Dispersion: Bradford’s Law of Scattering

The distribution of articles across journals followed the pattern predicted by Bradford’s Law of Scattering (Bradford, 1934, as cited in Ellegaard & Wallin, 2015), whereby a small “core” of highly productive sources accounts for a disproportionate share of the literature (Figure 5). The fitted model, $C(r) = -873.4 + 538.9 \times \log(r)$ ($R^2 = 0.982$; Bradford multiplier $k = 4.49$), partitioned the 847 sources into three zones: a Core zone of only 33 journals, a Zone 2 of 150 journals, and a much larger Zone 3 comprising 664 peripheral sources. This pronounced concentration indicates that a limited number of specialised education, psychology, and health-sciences journals serve as the primary outlets for research on undergraduate stress, while the remaining literature is widely dispersed across hundreds of low-frequency sources.

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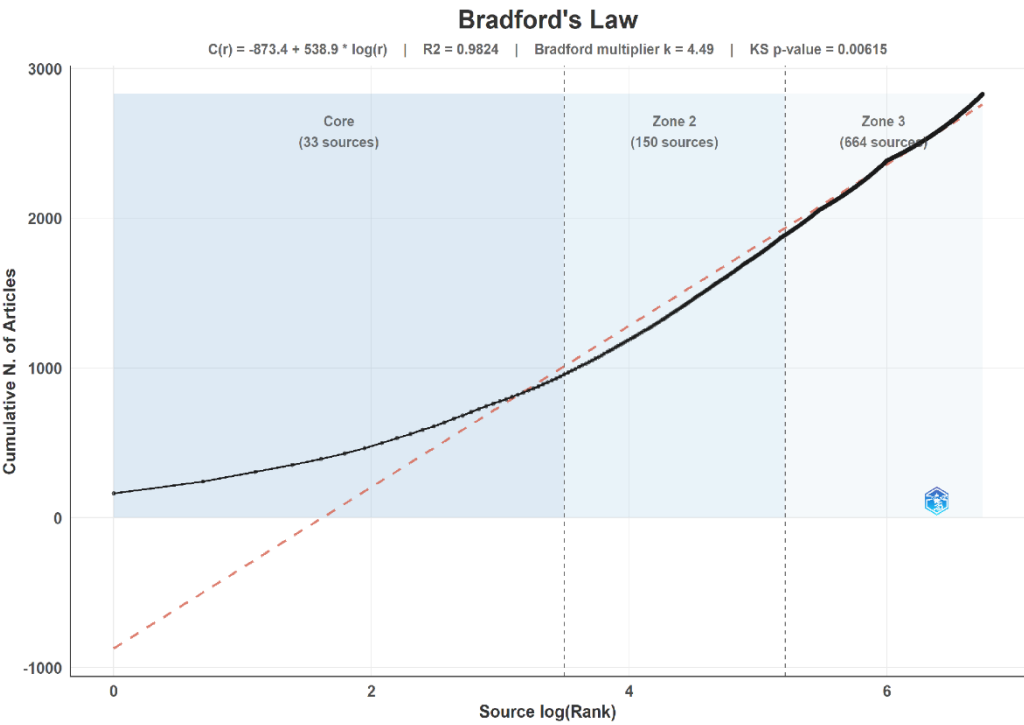


Figure 5. Bradford's Law source-dispersion curve (Core, Zone 2, and Zone 3 journals).

Citation Trends over Time

Average citations per year fluctuated between approximately 3.2 and 3.95 across 2016–2021, peaking around 2018 and again in 2021, before declining sharply from 2022 onward and approaching zero by 2026 (Figure 6). This pattern is consistent with the well-documented citation-accumulation lag, whereby more recently published articles have had less time to accrue citations, rather than reflecting a genuine decline in scholarly impact.

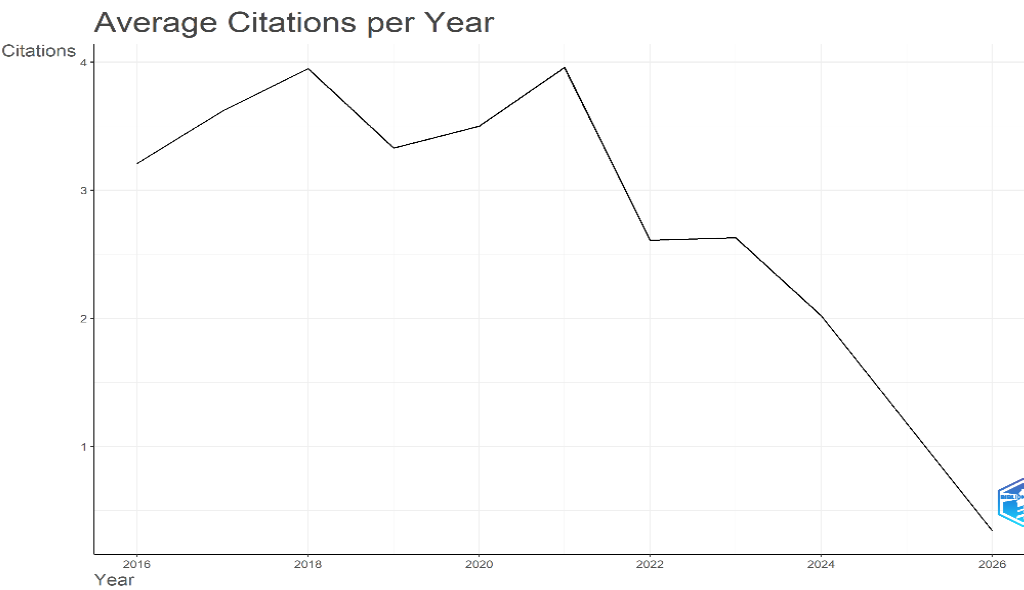


Figure 6. Average citations per year for articles published between 2016 and 2026.

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Geographic Distribution and International Collaboration

The United States was, by a wide margin, both the most cited and most productive country in this literature, accumulating 18,635 citations - more than five times the citation count of the second-ranked country, China (3,304 citations). The United Kingdom (2,186), Canada (2,182), and Australia (2,059) followed, with Germany, Spain, Turkey, India, and Korea contributing comparatively smaller but still substantial citation totals (Figure 7; Table 3). A global choropleth of country-level scientific production (Figure 8) confirms the dominance of North America and, to a lesser extent, China, Western Europe, Australia, and parts of the Middle East and South Asia, with large areas of Africa and Latin America contributing minimally to this literature.

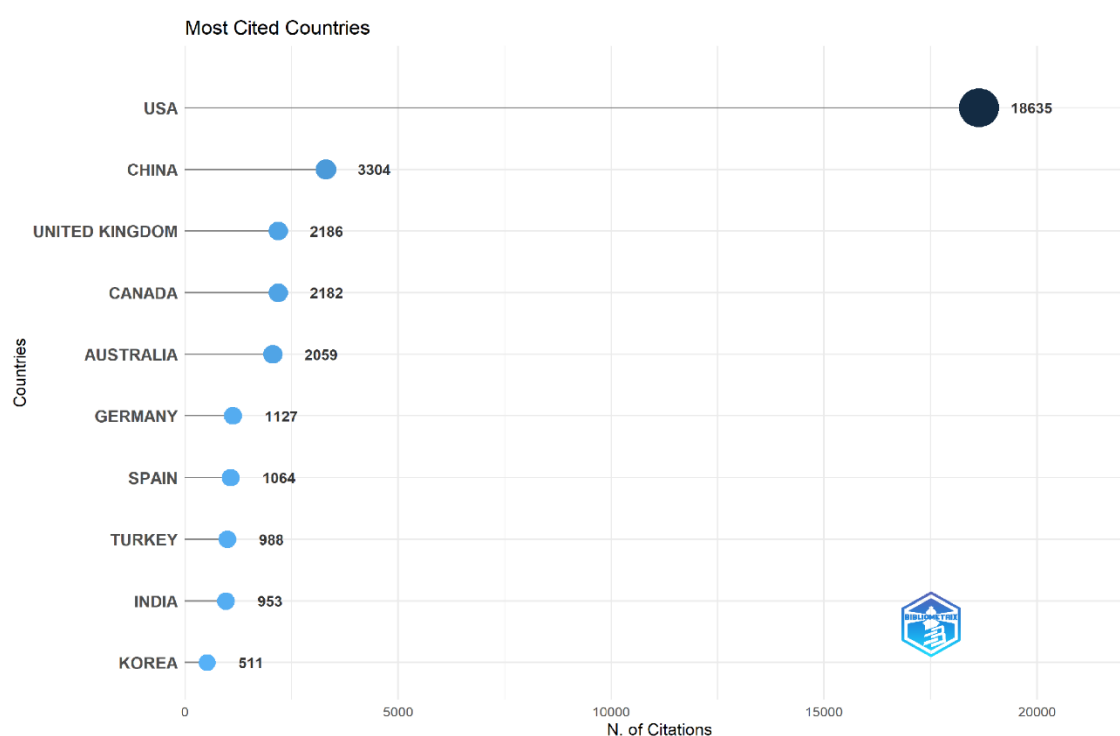


Figure 7. Most cited countries in the reviewed literature.

Table 3. Ten most cited countries in the analysed corpus.

Rank	Country	Citations
1	USA	18,635
2	China	3,304
3	United Kingdom	2,186
4	Canada	2,182
5	Australia	2,059
6	Germany	1,127
7	Spain	1,064
8	Turkey	988
9	India	953
10	Korea	511

Country Scientific Production

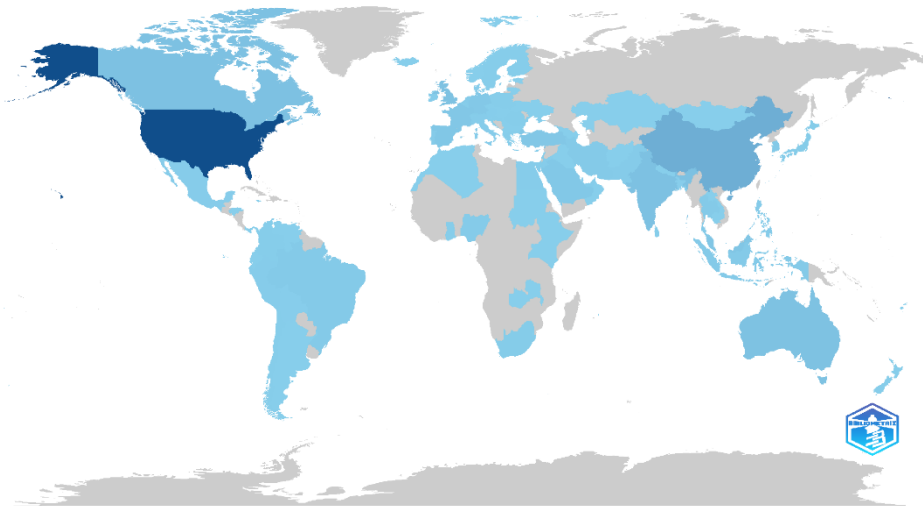


Figure 8. World map of country-level scientific production.

Further analysis of corresponding author countries, divided into two categories - Single Country Publications (SCP) and Multiple Country Publications (MCP) – further explains the structure of the collaboration within the field (see Figure 9 below). Once again, the leader was the United States, with more than 1,000 documents with corresponding authors, where the great majority of them were single-country publications, followed by China, Canada, the United Kingdom, India and Australia. In almost all cases, there was a higher number of SCPs than MCPs, reinforcing the relatively low international collaboration percentage (15.52%), which is provided in Table 1, and implying that most of the research teams in this area conduct their work within national borders. This can be seen directly on the visualization of the country-collaboration network (Figure 10 below): the United States represents the center of the network (high degree node), where the most intense collaboration is represented with South Africa, Egypt, Poland, Ghana, and several small and medium income countries, while there are several clusters (Middle East/North Africa - Egypt, Iraq, and Lebanon; Central/Eastern Europe - Poland) working independently of the American network.

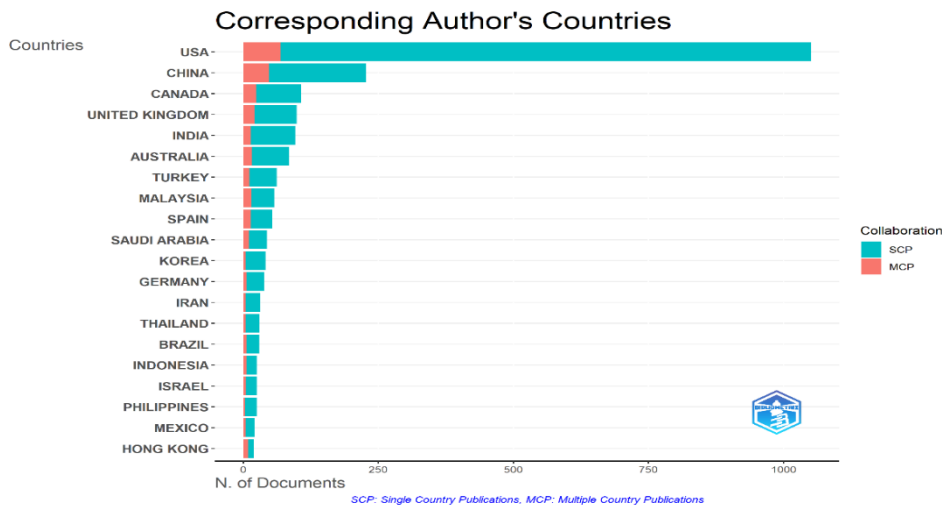


Figure 9. Corresponding author's countries by collaboration type (SCP vs. MCP).

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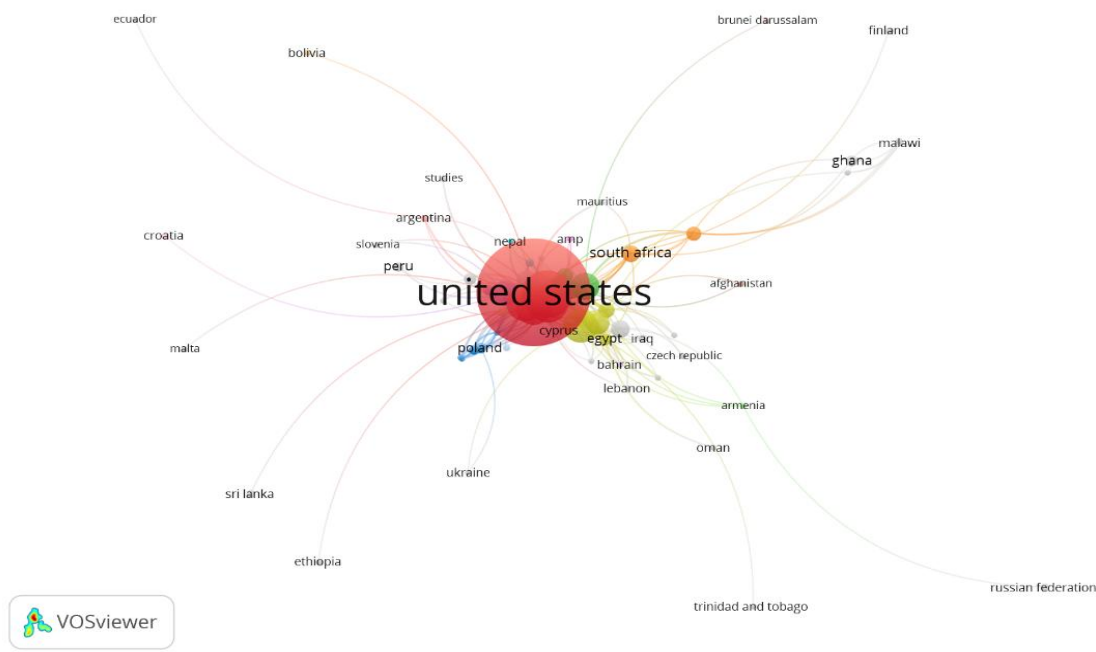


Figure 10. Country collaboration network (VOSviewer), centred on the United States.

Leading Institutions and Their Productivity over Time

On the institutional level, University of California had produced 59 publications, which was the highest number among the top 10 institutions, followed by Virginia Commonwealth University (44), California State University (39), University of Missouri (27), and Beijing Normal University (26), which was the only non-American institution to be in the top five (Figure 11; Table 4). The rest of the top 10 affiliations were Arizona State University, University of Houston, University of British Columbia, University of Michigan, and City University of New York.

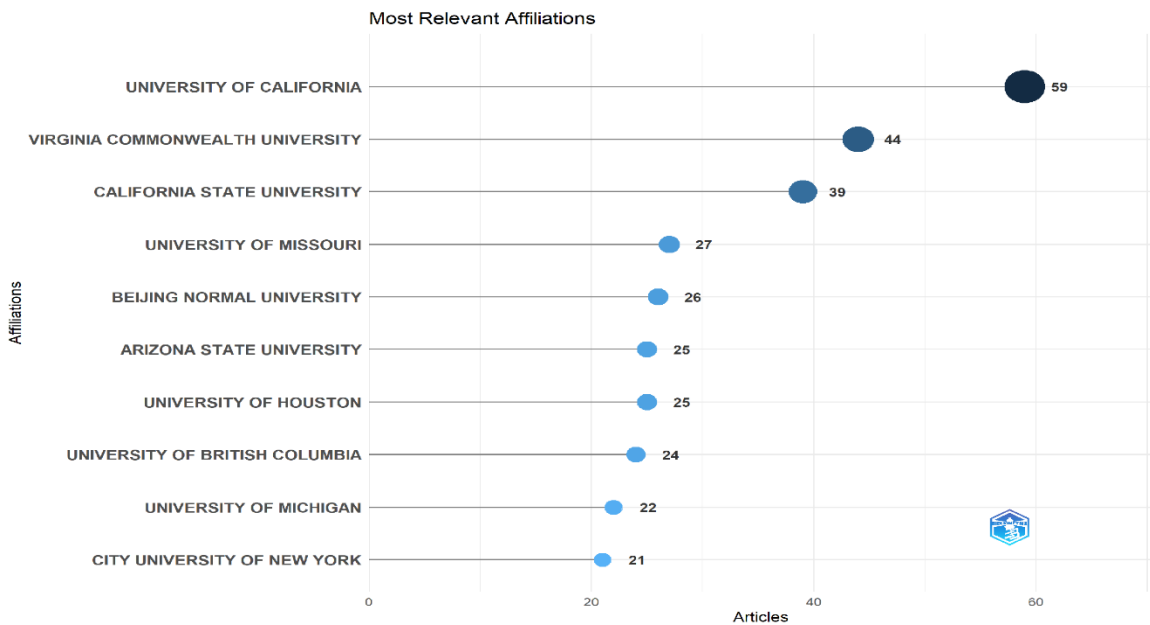


Figure 11. Ten most relevant (productive) affiliations.

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Table 4. Ten most relevant affiliations by article count.

Rank	Affiliation	Articles
1	University of California	59
2	Virginia Commonwealth University	44
3	California State University	39
4	University of Missouri	27
5	Beijing Normal University	26
6	Arizona State University	25
7	University of Houston	25
8	University of British Columbia	24
9	University of Michigan	22
10	City University of New York	21

Tracking productivity over time (Figure 12) shows that the University of California maintained a comparatively modest output until approximately 2019–2020, after which its production accelerated sharply, overtaking all other institutions by 2023 and reaching 59 cumulative articles by 2026. Virginia Commonwealth University showed an early lead (2016–2019) followed by a plateau and then a marked resurgence after 2024, while Beijing Normal University - despite entering the field later (post-2018) - demonstrated the steepest relative growth trajectory among the top five institutions, illustrating China’s expanding institutional footprint in this research area.

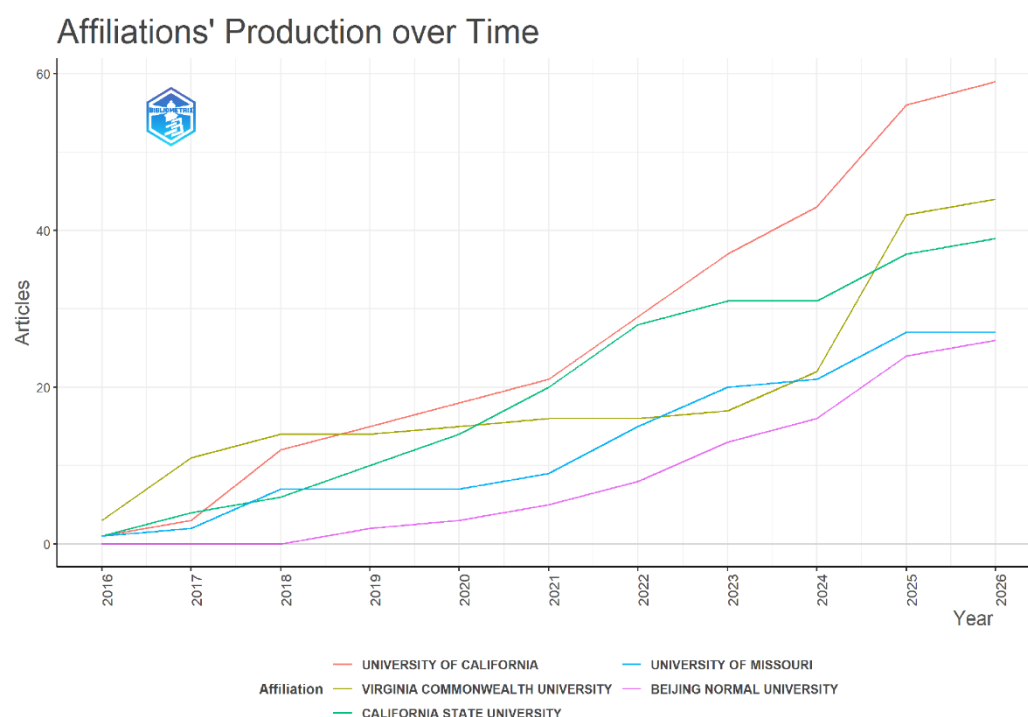


Figure 12. Cumulative productivity over time for the five most relevant affiliations.

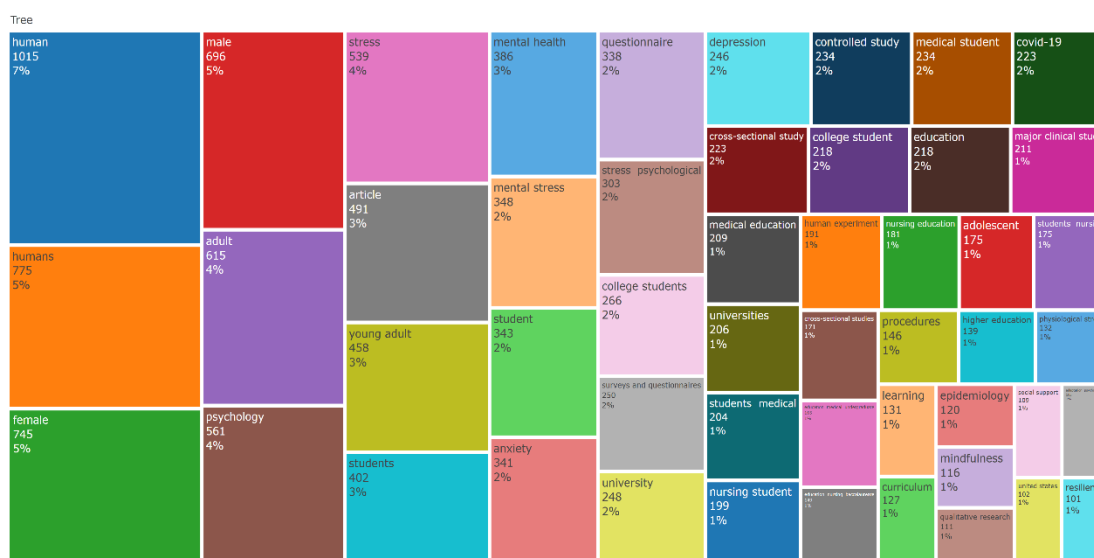
Keyword Analysis and Thematic Density

Vocabulary analysis based on author keywords and index terms shows the most frequently used words in the area of study. As follows from the biomedical indexing practice widely used in the majority of publications considered here, the generic demographic and methodological descriptors – “human/humans” (1,015/775 uses respectively), “female”

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Figure 13. Word cloud of the most frequent author keywords and index terms



The temporal evolution of the ten most frequent keywords (Figure 15) shows that cumulative usage of nearly all terms increased steadily and roughly in parallel through 2023, after which several substantive terms - most notably “stress”, “psychology”, and “adult” - began to accelerate more rapidly relative to purely demographic descriptors such as “article” and “young adult”, suggesting an increasing thematic specificity in more recent publications.

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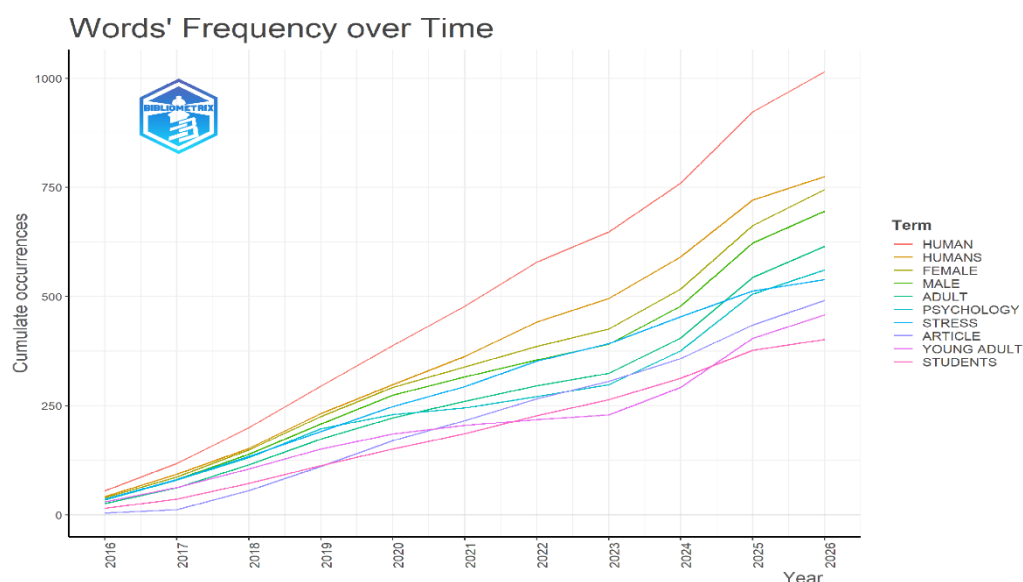


Figure 15. Cumulative frequency of the ten most common keywords over time (2016–2026).

Conceptual Structure Map (Multiple Correspondence Analysis)

The map produced by Multiple Correspondence Analysis (MCA) using the keywords used by the authors explains 71.65% of variance on Dimension 1 and an additional 12.81% on Dimension 2 (see Figure 16). Two major thematic zones have been found. The first major cluster - positioned in the negative part of Dimension 1 - includes demographic and methodological (human, humans, male, female, adult, psychology, questionnaire, article, cross-sectional study/studies, surveys and questionnaires) as well as population/context concepts referring to higher education and health professions education (university, universities, united states, student(s), college student, nursing student, medical student, nursing/medical education, curriculum). The second thematic zone - represented by anxiety, depression, mental health, stress, covid-19, college students, social support, mindfulness, and resilience - is more clinically and psychologically focused and corresponds to the pandemic-related research as well as to the positive-psychology concepts like resilience and mindfulness.

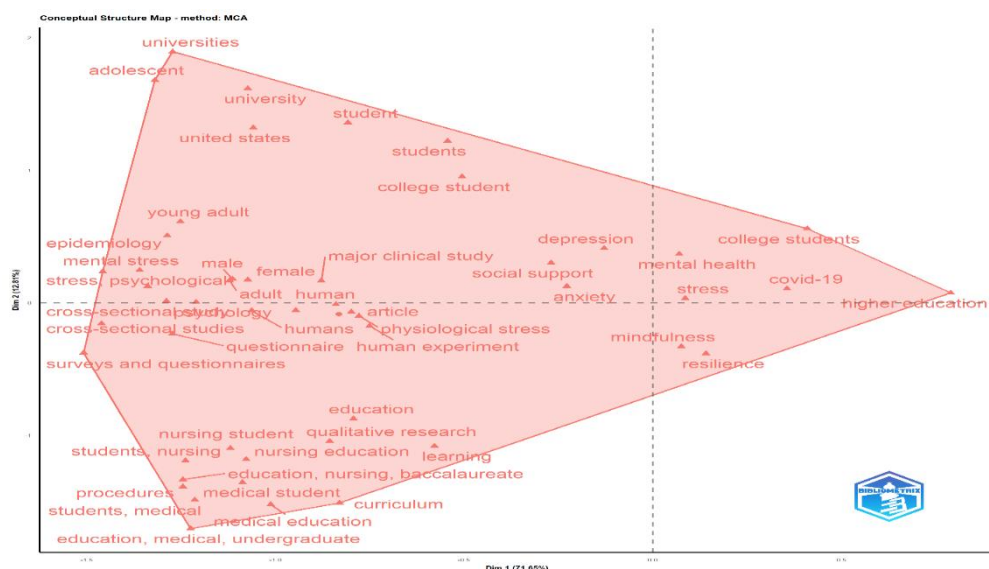


Figure 16. Conceptual structure map of author keywords (MCA), Dim 1 = 71.65%, Dim 2 = 12.81%.

Thematic Lineage: Linking Cited References, Authors, and Keywords

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Co-Citation Network Analysis

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densely inter-connected cluster of papers – represented, for example, by the studies of Servotte (2020), Hasan (2020), Al-Salman (2021), Petrongolo (2021), and Ruming (2017) – which seems to represent the most often co-cited studies, possessing similar reference lists and themes and likely revolving around the topic of nursing/clinical-education stress and simulation-based learning, given the co-presence of these authors with the keywords related to health professions education described above. The secondary cluster is less dense and less centrally connected to the core (Bhandari (2020), Lakeman (2022), Levenberg (2021), Leclerc (2022)). The colour scheme of the network, indicating the average publication date of its components, demonstrates that the relatively recent contributions to the co-citation structure (2023-2026; e.g. Rucker (2023), Jiang (2024), Vickery (2025), El-Zoghby (2025), Ullman (2026)) are still isolated nodes, which can be explained by the cited lag discussed in Section 3.4.



This bibliometric review of 2,829 Scopus-indexed articles offers a macro-level portrait of a research field that has grown rapidly, matured substantially, yet remains geographically concentrated and methodologically homogeneous. Three main patterns merit discussion.

Based on the life cycle analysis, the research into stress among undergraduate students has reached the maturity phase following its exponential growth (the peak year in the model was ≈ 2024), and its further growth is anticipated at a much slower pace until a certain ceiling, estimated at around 4,579 cumulative articles, will be reached in the late 2030s. This trend replicates the general pattern normally observed in “hot” interdisciplinary topics that become popular due to some external shock event – in this particular case, the COVID-19 pandemic, which is indicated both by the popularity of the “covid-19” keyword (223 mentions) and by the central role of pandemic-related studies (Cao et al., 2020; Son et al.,

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2020) in the citation network of this topic. In turn, the decreasing average number of citations per year following 2021–2022 (Figure 6) is definitely not a sign of a decline in the topic's scholarly relevance but just another citation accumulation delay effect (Ellegaard & Wallin, 2015).

Geographic Concentration and Limited International Collaboration

The unmitigated predominance of the United States in terms of citation importance (18,635 citations, more than five times than that of China) and institutional productivity (four out of the top five affiliations are American universities), coupled with a relatively low international collaboration rate (15.52%), suggests that the current state of the science is structurally based on just a few highly developed English-speaking research systems. Although the rapidly rising status of institutions in China (as shown by Beijing Normal University's fast growth trend since 2019; Figure 12) suggests the emergence of an opposition, the country-collaboration network (Figure 10) reveals that international connections are rare and mainly oriented from the United States rather than forming a true polycentric collaboration network. This poses serious questions regarding the generalisability of the findings on student stress in terms of the cultural and contextual aspects, taking into account the considerable differences in the stressors, coping abilities, and help-seeking patterns between educational systems and socio-cultural environments. For the further development of the area, research would benefit from purposeful investments in multi-country and cross-cultural collaborations, especially with the regions that have been insufficiently studied (sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, South/Southeast Asia).

Thematic and Methodological Structure

The keyword and structure of concepts analyses reveal an image of a discipline characterized by the prevalence of cross-sectional self-report questionnaire methodologies using demographic descriptions of the participants ("human", "female", "male", "adult", "young adult") undergraduate students. The prevalence of specific psychometric measures is noted – Perceived Stress Scale (Cohen et al., 1983), Depression Anxiety Stress Scales (Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995), Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (Zimet et al., 1988) and Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (Watson et al., 1988) – and regression and mediation approaches (Aiken & West, 1991; Hayes, 2013) are used for statistical data analysis. The above-described methodology convergence increases comparability of research results but at the same time limits the capacity of the field to generate causal or longitudinal inferences due to cross-sectional questionnaire design inability to address the directionality of stress and outcomes' associations. On the other hand, one can see that there is a development of a secondary axis of research interests associated with positive or protective constructs such as resilience, mindfulness, and social support along with an emerging sub-theme associated with the aspects of diversity and identity (racial identity, ethnic identity, microaggressions) and pedagogical adaptation (online learning, self-directed learning), which are strongly associated with the switch to remote and hybrid learning caused by the pandemic. Finally, it is possible to see the emergence of a clear niche of research associated with health professions education, including the students of medicine, nursing, and dentistry, which is clearly visible in the co-citation network along with authors such as Servotte, Hasan, and Al-Salman.

CONCLUSION

This bibliometric systematic review based on the corpus of 2,829 articles indexed in Scopus database from 2016 to 2026 demonstrates that research on stress experienced by

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undergraduate students has been quite developed and matured thanks to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. The area can be described as centralized in terms of its citations and institutional output as well as the low level of collaboration with other countries, the network of which is composed of dominant hubs. The core of this research domain consists of the transactional model of stress and coping and some standardized measures of psychometrics, mainly represented by cross-sectional questionnaires; however, such new topics as resilience, mindfulness, social support, and pedagogical issues of pandemic time show the growth of the substantive scope of this field of study. The future development of this research area would include the diversification of methods and internationalization of the evidence base.

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Conflict of Interest

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