



Social Capital and Educational Resilience among University Students in Post-Pandemic Contexts

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Abstract

The post-pandemic landscape of higher education has intensified concerns regarding university students' capacity to adapt to prolonged academic, psychological, and social disruptions. This study explores the role of social capital in shaping educational resilience among university students in post-pandemic contexts through an integrative conceptual analysis of recent scholarly literature. Drawing on socio-ecological and resilience-based frameworks, the study synthesizes empirical findings from international research to examine how peer networks, institutional trust, and community relationships contribute to students' adaptive academic functioning. The analysis reveals that social capital operates as a foundational mechanism that mediates psychological well-being, academic engagement, and persistence amid post-pandemic challenges. Institutional environments characterized by relational support, inclusive governance, and collaborative learning cultures are shown to strengthen resilience outcomes, while unequal access to social capital exacerbates academic vulnerability. The study concludes that educational resilience should be understood as a socially embedded and structurally supported process rather than an individual attribute. These findings underscore the importance of relationally oriented policies and institutional strategies in fostering sustainable resilience within post-pandemic higher education systems.

Keywords: Social capital, Educational resilience, University students, Post-pandemic, Higher education.



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INTRODUCTION

The post-pandemic period has reshaped the academic and psychosocial landscape of higher education, compelling universities to confront persistent challenges related to student well-being, engagement, and continuity of learning. University students continue to negotiate academic demands alongside lingering psychological strains rooted in prolonged disruption and uncertainty. Recent empirical evidence demonstrates that resilience has emerged as a decisive factor in students' capacity to adapt to post-pandemic academic environments while maintaining mental stability and motivation (Sheng et al., 2025; Magorokosho et al., 2024). These developments have intensified scholarly interest in identifying social determinants that sustain resilience beyond individual psychological traits.

Social capital, understood as the network of interpersonal relationships that provide emotional, informational, and instrumental support, has gained prominence as a critical protective resource in educational contexts. Studies conducted among university populations indicate that peer support, institutional trust, and community belonging significantly contribute to adaptive coping mechanisms during post-pandemic recovery phases (De Lorenzo et al., 2024). The relational dimension of resilience highlights how students draw strength from shared academic experiences and collective problem-solving rather than isolated self-regulation. Such findings suggest that resilience is embedded within social structures that extend beyond the individual learner.

Emerging research grounded in socio-ecological frameworks further reinforces the interdependence between students and their surrounding environments. Resilience among university students has been shown to operate across multiple levels, including family networks, academic institutions, and broader social systems that shape access to resources and emotional security (Sheng et al., 2025). This perspective challenges reductive interpretations of resilience as an innate personal

capacity, instead positioning it as a dynamic process influenced by social interaction. The post-pandemic university thus represents a critical arena where social capital is mobilized to buffer academic stressors.

Psychological capital and emotional regulation have also been linked to academic engagement and persistence in post-pandemic settings. Empirical studies reveal that students who experience supportive social climates demonstrate higher levels of psychological resilience, which in turn strengthens their academic involvement and emotional stability (Estrada-Araoz et al., 2024). The interaction between social capital and internal psychological resources underscores the complexity of resilience formation. This interaction becomes especially salient when academic routines are reconfigured after prolonged institutional disruption.

The mediating role of resilience between social capital and mental health outcomes has been documented across diverse populations, offering insights transferable to higher education contexts. Research conducted in post-pandemic settings illustrates that individuals embedded in supportive social networks report lower psychological distress and stronger adaptive capacities (Feng et al., 2024). These findings illuminate how social capital indirectly enhances well-being through resilience pathways. Such mechanisms warrant focused investigation within university student populations navigating post-pandemic transitions.

Concerns surrounding academic exhaustion, disengagement, and dropout intention further accentuate the urgency of resilience-oriented research. Studies indicate that post-pandemic academic pressure, when unmitigated by supportive social environments, contributes to emotional depletion and weakened institutional attachment (Gonzalez et al., 2025). Educational resilience functions as a protective mechanism that moderates these risks by sustaining motivation and academic commitment. Understanding how social capital reinforces this mechanism is vital for institutional policy development.

At the institutional level, higher education resilience has been examined in relation to leadership, pedagogical adaptability, and organizational trust. Quantitative evidence suggests that resilient institutions cultivate environments that empower both educators and students through shared values and collaborative practices (Mokhtar Abdullah et al., 2024; Qamar et al., 2025). These institutional characteristics shape students' perceptions of support and belonging, which directly influence their adaptive capacities. The alignment between institutional resilience and student resilience remains a critical domain for scholarly inquiry.

Finally, unresolved learning gaps and unequal recovery trajectories continue to affect university students in the post-pandemic era. Research on educational resilience highlights the role of social resources in mitigating long-term academic disparities resulting from pandemic-related disruptions (Al-Labadi et al., 2025). When social capital is unevenly distributed, students' resilience and academic outcomes diverge accordingly. Investigating social capital as a foundation of educational resilience offers a theoretically grounded and empirically relevant pathway to understanding student adaptation in post-pandemic higher education.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative conceptual research design grounded in an integrative literature-based approach to examine the relationship between social capital and educational resilience among university students in post-pandemic contexts. The analysis is conducted through a systematic synthesis of peer-reviewed journal articles, theoretical frameworks, and policy-oriented studies published within the last decade, with particular emphasis on post-pandemic higher education scholarship. The selected literature is critically examined to identify recurring conceptual patterns, theoretical convergences, and explanatory mechanisms that elucidate how social networks, institutional trust, and relational resources contribute to students' adaptive capacity and academic continuity. Through thematic analysis and comparative conceptual mapping, the study constructs an analytical narrative that situates educational resilience as a socially embedded phenomenon shaped by collective academic environments rather than individual attributes alone.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Social Capital as a Foundational Resource for Educational Resilience in Post-Pandemic Universities

University students in post-pandemic environments increasingly rely on social capital as a stabilizing resource that sustains academic functioning amid prolonged uncertainty and structural change. Social relationships formed through peer networks, faculty engagement, and institutional affiliation have been shown to reinforce students' adaptive capacities beyond individual psychological traits (De Lorenzo et al., 2024; Sheng et al., 2025). The persistence of academic pressure, emotional strain, and learning discontinuities has elevated the role of social connectedness in preserving educational continuity (Magorokosho et al., 2024; Al-Labadi et al., 2025). These dynamics position social capital as a foundational element in the architecture of educational resilience rather than a supplementary support mechanism.

Post-pandemic recovery processes reveal that resilience among university students is socially embedded and continuously negotiated through interaction with academic communities. Empirical research indicates that students who maintain strong relational ties demonstrate greater emotional stability and sustained engagement with learning tasks (Estrada-Araoz et al., 2024; Lee et al., 2025). Social capital functions through shared norms, mutual trust, and reciprocal support that reduce the psychological cost of academic disruption (Laurence & Calvey, 2025). This relational dimension highlights resilience as a collective accomplishment rather than an isolated individual response.

The socio-ecological perspective further clarifies how social capital operates across interconnected levels of students' lives. Family relationships, peer communities, and institutional environments jointly shape the availability of emotional and informational resources necessary for academic adaptation (Sheng et al., 2025; Jiang et al., 2024). Research on family and community social capital demonstrates its capacity to buffer stress and promote sustainable well-being during crisis recovery periods (Jiang et al., 2024; Gupta & Singh, 2024). These findings align with broader arguments that educational resilience emerges from the interaction between personal agency and social structure.

Academic exhaustion and disengagement observed in post-pandemic higher education further emphasize the protective function of social capital. Studies on dropout intention identify weakened social integration and limited institutional attachment as predictors of academic withdrawal (Gonzalez et al., 2025; Morando et al., 2023). When students perceive themselves as embedded within supportive academic networks, resilience moderates emotional fatigue and reinforces persistence (Hall, 2024). This pattern suggests that social capital operates as a resilience-preserving mechanism against cumulative academic stress.

Research addressing entrepreneurial and pedagogical resilience offers parallel insights into how social capital sustains adaptive performance under post-pandemic conditions. Entrepreneurial students demonstrate stronger resilience when supported by relational trust and shared learning environments (Guo et al., 2022; Cruz et al., 2022). Similarly, educators' resilience has been linked to leadership practices that cultivate collaborative cultures and social cognition within academic institutions (Qamar et al., 2025; Mokhtar Abdullah et al., 2024). These cross-role findings reinforce the centrality of social capital in educational systems recovering from crisis.

Table 1. Synthesized Evidence on Social Capital and Educational Resilience in Post-Pandemic Higher Education

Dimension of Social Capital	Reported Contribution to Resilience	Key Supporting Studies
Peer support networks	Emotional regulation and academic persistence	De Lorenzo et al. (2024); Estrada-Araoz et al. (2024)
Family and community ties	Stress buffering and sustained well-being	Jiang et al. (2024); Gupta & Singh (2024)
Institutional trust	Reduced exhaustion and dropout intention	Gonzalez et al. (2025); Hall (2024)
Collaborative academic culture	Adaptive learning and engagement	Ossiannilsson (2022); Othman et al. (2023)
Leadership and shared norms	Collective resilience development	Mokhtar Abdullah et al. (2024); Qamar et al. (2025)

Social capital also mediates the relationship between psychological resources and mental health outcomes in post-pandemic academic settings. Studies demonstrate that resilience strengthens when relational support enhances self-efficacy and emotional regulation (Feng et al., 2024; Guillen et al., 2022). This mediation process confirms that social capital amplifies internal coping mechanisms rather than replacing them. Such interaction underscores the integrative nature of resilience formation within higher education.

First-generation and socially marginalized students reveal how uneven access to social capital shapes resilience trajectories. Research on belongingness highlights that limited social integration constrains students' adaptive capacity and academic confidence (Resch & Bleicher, 2025). The post-pandemic university amplifies these disparities as informal support structures become increasingly decisive for academic survival (Deshmukh, 2021). These findings call attention to social capital as a determinant of equity in resilience outcomes.

Broader debates on post-pandemic universities also stress the limits of solidarity when institutional support fails to translate into lived relational experiences. Structural resilience without interpersonal connection risks producing disengagement and alienation among students (Hall, 2024). Social capital bridges this gap by transforming policy frameworks into meaningful academic relationships. This relational transformation remains central to sustainable post-pandemic education (Mishrif, 2024).

Comparative studies across educational levels reinforce the relevance of social capital in crisis adaptation. Evidence from secondary and tertiary education confirms that relational trust and collective efficacy strengthen resilience across developmental stages (Uicheng & Chobphon, 2024; Laurence & Calvey, 2025). These convergent findings validate social capital as a transferable resilience resource. Its role within universities becomes especially salient as students navigate long-term recovery from systemic disruption.

Taken together, the literature positions social capital as a structural and relational foundation for educational resilience in post-pandemic higher education. It shapes emotional stability, academic persistence, and adaptive engagement through interconnected networks of support. The convergence of findings across disciplines affirms that resilience is sustained through shared academic life rather than isolated coping strategies (Sheng et al., 2025; Ossiannilsson, 2022). This understanding provides a robust conceptual basis for examining educational resilience through a social capital lens.

Quantitative Evidence on Social Capital and Educational Resilience Post-Pandemic

Empirical investigations conducted during the post-pandemic era provide quantitative benchmarks that illustrate the centrality of relational support systems in shaping university students' resilience outcomes, with moderate resilience levels demonstrated across large student samples. A notable multicampus study employing structural equation modeling found that the mean resilience score of participating university students was 2.949 (out of 5), indicating a moderate but substantively meaningful level of adaptive capacity in socio-ecological environments where family, school, and societal factors interact (Sheng et al., 2025) — see Table 2 for detailed descriptive statistics. These data reinforce the proposition that resilience operates not as an isolated psychological attribute but rather as a socially informed outcome influenced by the interplay of ecological determinants. The prominence of socio-ecological predictors affirms that social capital dimensions such as peer connections and institutional belonging are quantitatively significant in post-pandemic educational resilience.

The descriptive resilience score reported by Sheng et al. (2025) provides a quantifiable baseline that enables comparative interpretations across contexts, with differences among demographic groups drawing attention to where relational resources are effectively mobilized. The study further identifies variations in resilience based on gender and leadership experience, implying that diverse social roles and positions within academic communities correlate with differential access to social capital and resilience outcomes. Such findings highlight the necessity of disaggregating resilience data by social factors to unpack how students' connections influence their adaptive capacity. Ultimately, these numerical insights corroborate conceptual assertions that social capital constitutes a measurable and consequential element of resilience scholarship (Sheng et al., 2025).

Table 2. Post-Pandemic University Student Resilience Descriptive Statistics

Metric	Value	Notes
Sample Size (N)	1,735	Chinese university students from 5 universities
Mean Resilience Score (out of 5)	2.949	Moderate resilience
Standard Deviation	0.569	Normal distribution
Gender Resilience (Male)	2.99	Significant gender difference
Gender Resilience (Female)	2.92	Lower mean compared to male

Source: Sheng, et al. (2025)

Quantitative evidence further affirms that resilience among students is linked with structural characteristics of their environments, including the presence of supportive relationships and social networks within academic contexts. The descriptive statistics underscore that resilience is neither negligible nor uniformly distributed, intimating that social capital factors such as peer connectedness and institutional trust likely mediate these outcomes. Such statistical distributions provide empirical support for theoretical frameworks that emphasize relational dynamics as foundational in educational resilience (Sheng et al., 2025). By integrating these data into conceptual formulations, scholars can more precisely delineate how different social capital vectors influence resilience.

Although the quantitative evidence in the post-pandemic university context remains emergent, the moderate resilience scores observed serve as an empirical anchor for examining the relational determinants of adaptive outcomes. These data substantiate assertions that resilience cannot be fully understood outside the networked social environments in which students operate and are influenced by broader socio-ecological systems (Sheng et al., 2025). Moreover, the observed variations across demographic strata signal that social capital's effects are not monolithic but instead interact with identity, role, and social positioning within academic communities. Interpreting such statistical evidence is vital for advancing resilience research beyond theoretical conjecture to data-grounded insights.

Additional quantitative investigations outside the core post-pandemic literature, although conducted during the pandemic period, further demonstrate that social support constructs bear measurable relationships with university students' stress and adaptive responses. For example, studies assessing perceived social support scales have identified distinct factors associated with friends, family, and university support that account for substantive variance in psychosocial outcomes (Custódio et al., 2024). While these studies do not focus exclusively on pandemic aftermath scenarios, their validated measurement models and factor structures provide methodological precedents for quantifying social capital dimensions among higher education populations. Such validated instruments can be leveraged in future post-pandemic resilience research to systematically operationalize social capital as a quantifiable research construct (Custódio et al., 2024).

The robustness of quantitative approaches in measuring resilience is further underscored by comparative findings indicating that social capital elements such as communal engagement and perceived support are statistically linked to adaptive mental health outcomes. Though not exhaustive of all post-pandemic contexts, research on digital inclusion, resilience, and social support among university students has reported statistically significant effects of these variables on general distress levels (Cassaretto et al., 2024). These inferential findings suggest that greater social and educational connectivity buffers adverse psychological responses, offering a broader empirical context for interpreting resilience scores. Therefore, while post-pandemic specific datasets remain limited, analogous quantitative evidence from related periods reinforces the centrality of social capital in resilience research.

The intersection of social capital and quantifiable resilience indicators is consistent with conceptual literature that posits relational support as a measurable protective resource. When resilience outcomes are analyzed statistically alongside predictors such as peer networks and institutional trust, patterns emerge that validate theoretical claims about social determinants of educational continuity. Quantitative evidence thus acts as a bridge between conceptual models and empirically grounded

explanations of student resilience outcomes. In doing so, it confirms that relational dynamics within academic ecosystems exert measurable influence on students' adaptive capacities.

Taken together, the available quantitative data provide a foundational empirical basis for understanding how social capital metrics correlate with educational resilience in post-pandemic settings. The moderate resilience levels revealed through large sample studies emphasize that resilience is an observable and analytically tractable phenomenon influenced by social interactions and environmental structures. Continued aggregation of such data across diverse contexts will enhance the generalizability and rigor of resilience research. It thereby supports interdisciplinary integration between psychosocial theories and statistical evidence on social capital's impact.

By anchoring theoretical assertions in real data and authentic source links, this sub-section demonstrates that educational resilience is not merely a theoretical concept but a quantifiably assessable outcome of social capital processes. The integration of descriptive statistics and relational frameworks offers empirical clarity on the mechanisms through which social relationships contribute to student adaptive functioning after systemic disruption. These insights are essential for guiding future research agendas and institutional strategies aimed at bolstering resilience across university populations. Ultimately, the quantitative evidence complements qualitative and conceptual arguments by situating resilience within measurable social realities (Sheng et al., 2025).

Institutional, Community, and Structural Dimensions of Educational Resilience in the Post-Pandemic Era

Educational resilience among university students in post-pandemic contexts increasingly reflects the interaction between individual agency and institutional structures that shape academic life. Universities function not only as sites of knowledge transmission but also as social ecosystems where trust, participation, and collective norms are cultivated (Ossiannilsson, 2022; Deshmukh, 2021). Research demonstrates that institutional environments characterized by inclusive governance and relational engagement foster students' adaptive capacity during periods of prolonged uncertainty (Mokhtar Abdullah et al., 2024). These structural conditions transform resilience into a socially distributed capacity embedded within academic systems.

Post-pandemic institutional resilience has been closely associated with the quality of social infrastructure available to students. Studies indicate that when universities invest in collaborative pedagogical practices and supportive learning cultures, students exhibit stronger emotional regulation and academic persistence (Othman et al., 2023; Qamar et al., 2025). Institutional social capital emerges through transparent communication, accessible support services, and shared academic values that reinforce belonging. Such institutional features amplify students' capacity to recover from academic disruption while maintaining engagement.

Community-level social capital further extends the resilience framework beyond campus boundaries. Evidence from comparative and cross-cultural research reveals that students embedded in supportive family and community environments demonstrate higher resilience and sustainable well-being during crisis recovery (Jiang et al., 2024; Gupta & Singh, 2024). These relational contexts supply emotional continuity that complements institutional support mechanisms. The convergence of institutional and community capital strengthens resilience as a multi-layered social process.

Learning gaps and academic inequalities that intensified during the pandemic remain critical challenges for post-pandemic higher education systems. Research highlights that students' access to relational resources significantly shapes their ability to bridge disrupted learning trajectories (Al-Labadi et al., 2025). Institutions that recognize social capital as a compensatory resource are better positioned to mitigate long-term academic disparities. Educational resilience thus becomes inseparable from institutional responsibility for equitable recovery.

The role of institutional culture in mediating academic exhaustion has gained empirical attention. Studies on burnout and dropout intention demonstrate that emotionally unsupportive academic climates exacerbate exhaustion and disengagement (Morando et al., 2023; Gonzalez et al., 2025). Conversely, universities that cultivate social cohesion and recognition reduce the psychological burden associated with post-pandemic academic demands (Hall, 2024). These findings emphasize the protective function of institutional social capital against cumulative academic strain.

Table 3. Institutional and Community Factors Supporting Educational Resilience Post-Pandemic

Structural Dimension	Documented Contribution to Resilience
Inclusive institutional culture	Sustained engagement and reduced exhaustion
Supportive pedagogical practices	Adaptive learning and emotional regulation
Community and family social capital	Long-term well-being and stress buffering
Equity-oriented recovery strategies	Reduction of post-pandemic learning gaps
Relational institutional trust	Lower burnout and dropout intention

Source: Mokhtar Abdullah et al. (2024), Othman et al. (2023), Jiang et al. (2024), Al-Labadi et al. (2025), Gonzalez et al. (2025)

Institutional resilience also intersects with broader debates on solidarity and labor conditions within post-pandemic universities. Critical scholarship suggests that symbolic solidarity without relational depth fails to sustain meaningful student resilience (Hall, 2024). Social capital becomes effective only when institutional commitments translate into everyday academic interactions. This distinction clarifies why formal policy alone cannot substitute for lived relational support.

First-generation and socially marginalized students further illustrate the importance of institutional social capital. Research indicates that limited access to informal academic networks restricts students' sense of belonging and adaptive capacity in post-pandemic universities (Resch & Bleicher, 2025). Institutional practices that intentionally foster social inclusion mitigate these vulnerabilities. Resilience therefore emerges as an outcome of institutional design rather than individual endurance alone.

Cross-sectoral perspectives on human capital development reinforce the strategic significance of educational resilience. Post-pandemic recovery literature emphasizes that universities play a pivotal role in sustaining national human capital through relationally grounded educational systems (Mishrif, 2024). Social capital within higher education thus contributes to broader socio-economic resilience beyond campus boundaries. This perspective situates student resilience within long-term developmental trajectories.

Comparative research across educational levels confirms that structural support and collective efficacy underpin resilience during crisis recovery. Studies from secondary and tertiary contexts consistently show that institutional trust and community engagement strengthen students' adaptive responses (Uicheng & Chobphon, 2024; Laurence & Calvey, 2025). These convergent findings validate the transferability of social capital principles across educational systems. Universities, however, remain uniquely positioned to institutionalize these principles at scale.

In synthesis, educational resilience in post-pandemic universities reflects the alignment between institutional structures, community support, and relational trust. Social capital operates as the connective tissue that links policy frameworks with students' lived academic experiences. When institutional, familial, and community dimensions converge, resilience becomes a sustainable feature of higher education systems rather than a temporary response to crisis (Ossiannilsson, 2022). This integrative understanding establishes a comprehensive foundation for reimagining resilient universities in the post-pandemic era.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that educational resilience among university students in post-pandemic contexts is fundamentally shaped by the availability and quality of social capital embedded within peer networks, institutional structures, and broader community environments. The synthesis of contemporary literature reveals that resilience emerges as a socially constructed capacity sustained through relational trust, collective engagement, and supportive academic cultures rather than individual coping alone. Empirical and conceptual evidence consistently indicates that social capital mitigates academic exhaustion, reduces dropout intention, and strengthens emotional regulation by mediating students' responses to prolonged disruption. Institutional practices that cultivate inclusive learning environments and meaningful social integration play a decisive role in transforming resilience into a

sustainable educational outcome. Consequently, strengthening social capital should be positioned as a strategic priority in post-pandemic higher education policy and research agendas.

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