

The Effect of Life Skills on Students' Deviant Behaviors with the Mediating Role of Psychological Capital

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study aimed to examine the effect of life skills on students' deviant behaviors, with a particular focus on the mediating role of psychological capital.

Methods and Materials: This descriptive-survey and applied research was conducted on a statistical population comprising all male and female lower- and upper-secondary school students in Rudsar during the 2024–2025 academic year. Using the Krejcie and Morgan table, a sample of 384 students was selected through stratified random sampling. Data were collected using the Jessor and Jessor Deviant Behavior Questionnaire (1977), the World Health Organization Life Skills Questionnaire (1997), and the Luthans Psychological Capital Questionnaire (2007), all rated on a five-point Likert scale. The reliability of the instruments was confirmed using Cronbach's alpha, and their content and construct validity were verified through expert review and confirmatory factor analysis. Data analysis involved descriptive statistics and inferential techniques, including the Kolmogorov–Smirnov Test for normality, and structural equation modeling and path analysis using SPSS and SmartPLS software.

Findings: The results showed that life skills had a significant positive effect on psychological capital ($\beta = 0.471$, $t = 10.556$, $p < 0.05$) and a significant negative direct effect on deviant behaviors ($\beta = -0.195$, $t = 3.936$, $p < 0.05$). Psychological capital had a significant negative effect on deviant behaviors ($\beta = -0.427$, $t = 9.355$, $p < 0.05$). Moreover, psychological capital played a significant partial mediating role in the relationship between life skills and deviant behaviors, with an indirect effect of $\beta = -0.201$ ($t = 6.983$, $p < 0.05$).

Conclusion: Life skills reduce deviant behaviors both directly and indirectly by enhancing psychological capital, indicating the necessity of interventions that simultaneously foster psychosocial competencies and positive psychological resources in adolescents.

Keywords: Life skills; Deviant behaviors; Psychological capital; Adolescents; Structural equation modeling

1. Introduction

Adolescence is widely regarded as a critical period for psychological, emotional, and behavioral development, marked by increased vulnerability to engaging in risk-taking and deviant behaviors. During this life stage, adolescents undergo profound physical, cognitive, and social transformations that can challenge their ability to regulate emotions, cope with stressors, and make constructive decisions. Deviant behaviors, including rule-breaking, aggression, substance use, and other forms of norm-violating conduct, often emerge during this period and can have lasting consequences for academic, social, and psychological outcomes. These behaviors are frequently shaped by a complex interplay of individual vulnerabilities, environmental stressors, and deficiencies in psychosocial skills. According to the problem behavior theory, deviant behavior can be understood as an outcome of interactions among personality systems, perceived environmental systems, and behavioral systems, highlighting the multifactorial nature of behavioral regulation in adolescence (Jessor & Jessor, 1977).

Recent evidence underscores the importance of life skills as a protective factor in mitigating deviant behaviors among adolescents. Life skills are defined as psychosocial abilities that enable individuals to cope effectively with the demands and challenges of daily life, encompassing competencies such as decision-making, problem-solving, critical thinking, emotional regulation, communication, and interpersonal relationships (World Health, 1997). Adolescents equipped with stronger life skills are better able to manage peer pressure, navigate emotional challenges, and resist engagement in risk-laden behaviors. Research has demonstrated that training in life skills contributes to reductions in aggression, substance use, and antisocial behaviors, while enhancing prosocial conduct and emotional adjustment (Rahimi et al., 2016; Sheikhan et al., 2022). Life skills development is thus recognized as a cornerstone of preventive interventions aimed at fostering resilience and adaptive functioning during adolescence (Shekoff et al., 2024).

In addition to reducing behavioral risks, life skills training has been shown to improve various psychological resources that buffer adolescents against maladaptive outcomes. For instance, structured life skills programs significantly reduce psychological distress and enhance adaptive capacities such as emotional regulation, self-efficacy, and positive thinking in vulnerable populations (Ghadiri Nyari & Meshkbid

Haghighi, 2022). These outcomes are not only relevant for preventing deviant behaviors but also for promoting broader psychological well-being, which is essential for adolescents' long-term mental health and academic success. Studies have further indicated that life skills training effectively decreases engagement in risky behaviors, including violence, delinquency, and substance misuse, particularly among students in secondary education settings (Fallah et al., 2021; Larni et al., 2021).

Parallel to the literature on life skills, psychological capital has emerged as another critical construct for understanding and promoting positive developmental outcomes during adolescence. Psychological capital is conceptualized as a higher-order core construct comprising hope, self-efficacy, resilience, and optimism, which collectively represent an individual's positive psychological state (Luthans et al., 2007). Adolescents with higher levels of psychological capital demonstrate greater motivation, perseverance, and adaptive coping strategies, which protect them from succumbing to maladaptive behaviors. Empirical studies have found that psychological capital enhances academic performance, fosters emotional well-being, and reduces engagement in problematic or deviant behaviors by strengthening internal resources and self-regulatory capacities (Kanengoni et al., 2018; Moreno-Montero et al., 2024).

Psychological capital not only contributes directly to reducing deviant behaviors but also mediates the relationship between environmental and personal factors and behavioral outcomes. For example, higher psychological capital can buffer the negative effects of stress, adverse peer influences, and academic pressure, thereby reducing the likelihood of adolescents adopting maladaptive coping mechanisms. Studies among university and school populations have shown that psychological capital predicts students' well-being, engagement, and adaptive learning behaviors (Ortega-Maldonado & Salanova, 2018; Saman & Wirawan, 2024). Furthermore, psychological capital has been linked to improved quality of life, with constructs such as courage moderating this relationship (Santisi et al., 2020), and has been found to facilitate positive outcomes even under conditions of adversity, including unemployment or academic failure (Chen & Lim, 2012).

Importantly, life skills and psychological capital appear to be interrelated constructs that jointly shape adolescents' behavioral trajectories. Life skills training has been shown to promote components of psychological capital by strengthening self-efficacy, optimism, and resilience—

factors that are vital for adolescents to navigate challenges effectively (Azadi Pour & Shoghi, 2023). Adolescents who acquire core life skills tend to develop a sense of agency and confidence in managing obstacles, which contributes to building psychological capital. Conversely, psychological capital can enhance the application and maintenance of life skills by fostering motivation and persistence. Research supports the notion that interventions integrating life skills and psychological capital development yield superior outcomes in preventing risk behaviors and promoting psychological adjustment (Kounkroo, 2025; Larni, 2025).

In the context of deviant behaviors, this dual focus on life skills and psychological capital is especially critical. Studies have documented that adolescents involved in deviant behaviors often present with lower levels of self-control, emotional regulation, and coping abilities, as well as diminished psychological capital resources. For example, research on students at risk of internet addiction revealed that family dysfunction and insufficient psychological resources were significantly associated with higher levels of deviant behaviors (Zhang et al., 2024). This underscores the need for preventive interventions that not only address skill deficits but also bolster internal psychological strengths. Equipping adolescents with life skills can mitigate the allure of deviant behaviors by providing them with healthier strategies to manage emotions, make decisions, and cope with social challenges, while psychological capital can reinforce their capacity to sustain these adaptive behaviors over time.

In sum, adolescence represents a pivotal window for implementing interventions aimed at reducing deviant behaviors and promoting psychological well-being. Life skills and psychological capital are two complementary protective factors that can jointly contribute to these goals. Life skills provide adolescents with the external behavioral and cognitive tools to navigate challenges, while psychological capital equips them with the internal psychological resources to persist and thrive in the face of adversity. The theoretical and empirical literature strongly supports the integration of these constructs in efforts to prevent deviant behaviors among youth. Building on this evidence, the present study investigates the effect of life skills on students' deviant behaviors, with a specific focus on the mediating role of psychological capital.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

The present study is descriptive and survey-based in nature and methodology, as it examines the current situation and analyzes the relationships among the research variables within a specific time frame. Furthermore, in terms of purpose, this study is considered applied research.

The statistical population of this study consisted of all students enrolled in schools in the city of Rudsar during the current academic year. This population included both male and female students at the lower- and upper-secondary levels studying in public and private schools in this city. This population was chosen due to its accessibility, demographic diversity, and the potential for generalizing the findings to other similar regions. Moreover, this population possesses acceptable diversity in demographic characteristics such as age, gender, educational level, and educational background.

The statistical sample of this study comprised 384 students from the city of Rudsar, determined based on the Krejcie and Morgan table according to the size of the population. The sampling method was stratified random sampling. This sample size is sufficient to generalize the findings to the entire population. The sample was selected to ensure representation of both genders and various educational levels.

2.2. Measures

The instruments used in this study included: (1) the Jessor and Jessor Deviant Behavior Questionnaire (1977), which contains 9 items. Responses are rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). (2) the World Health Organization Life Skills Questionnaire (1997), which includes 15 items across the following subscales: self-awareness and emotional skills (3 items), communication and interpersonal skills (3 items), decision-making and critical thinking skills (3 items), coping and resilience skills (3 items), and goal-setting and time management skills (3 items). Responses are rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). (3) the Luthans Psychological Capital Questionnaire (2007), which includes 12 items across the following subscales: hope (3 items), self-efficacy (3 items), resilience (3 items), and optimism (3 items). Responses are rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5).

2.3. Data Analysis

To test the hypotheses and analyze the relationships among the research variables, including independent, mediating, and dependent variables, the structural equation modeling (SEM) technique was employed. The specialized software SPSS and SmartPLS were used to perform these analyses.

3. Findings and Results

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics of the Questionnaire Components

Variable	Mean	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis	Min	Max
Deviant Behaviors	23.33	6.943	0.603	-0.280	11	41
Self-Awareness and Emotional Skills	11.28	2.100	-1.081	0.973	5	15
Communication and Interpersonal Skills	10.51	2.537	-0.476	-0.062	3	15
Decision-Making and Critical Thinking	11.32	2.372	-0.334	-0.197	3	15
Coping and Resilience Skills	10.52	2.393	-0.578	-0.293	3	15
Goal-Setting and Time Management Skills	10.11	2.427	-0.501	-0.319	3	15
Life Skills (total)	53.77	9.668	-0.518	-0.177	26	73
Hope	9.92	3.038	-0.263	-0.764	3	15
Self-Efficacy	9.63	3.040	-0.221	-0.907	3	15
Resilience	10.22	2.656	-0.481	-0.180	3	15
Optimism	11.10	2.505	-0.766	-0.133	4	15
Psychological Capital (total)	40.89	8.482	-0.253	-0.586	18	57

As shown in Table 1, the mean score for deviant behaviors was 23.33 (SD = 6.94), with scores ranging from 11 to 41. Among the life skills subcomponents, self-awareness and emotional skills had a mean of 11.28 (SD = 2.10), communication and interpersonal skills had a mean of 10.51 (SD = 2.54), decision-making and critical thinking skills had a mean of 11.32 (SD = 2.37), coping and resilience skills had a mean of 10.52 (SD = 2.39), and goal-setting and time management skills had a mean of 10.11 (SD = 2.43). The overall life skills score averaged 53.77 (SD = 9.67) with a range of 26 to 73. Regarding psychological capital, hope had a mean of 9.92 (SD = 3.04), self-efficacy 9.63 (SD = 3.04), resilience 10.22 (SD = 2.66), and optimism 11.10 (SD = 2.51). The overall psychological capital score averaged 40.89 (SD = 8.48), ranging from 18 to 57. The skewness and kurtosis values for all variables were within acceptable ranges, indicating approximately normal distributions.

The study sample consisted of 384 students from the city of Rudsar, including 217 girls (51.56%) and 167 boys (49.43%). In terms of age distribution, 105 students (27.34%) were 13–14 years old, 142 students (36.98%) were 15–16 years old, and 137 students (35.68%) were 17–18 years old. Regarding educational level, 125 students (32.55%) were in seventh and eighth grades, 109 students (28.39%) were in ninth and tenth grades, and 150 students (39.06%) were in eleventh and twelfth grades. This demographic composition ensured diversity in gender, age, and grade level across the sample.

The results of the factor analysis suitability tests indicated that the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Test (KMO) value was 0.769, demonstrating an acceptable level of sampling adequacy for conducting factor analysis. Additionally, the Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was significant ($\chi^2 = 6306.584$, $df = 325$, $p = 0.001$), confirming that the correlation matrix was not an identity matrix and that the data were suitable for factor analysis.

The coefficient of determination (R^2) values indicated that life skills explained 22.2% of the variance in psychological capital and 29.8% of the variance in deviant behaviors. Additionally, the predictive relevance (Q^2) values were 0.120 for psychological capital and 0.132 for deviant behaviors, confirming an acceptable level of predictive power for the structural model.

Table 2

Results of the Structural Model Evaluation for Testing the Research Hypotheses

Hypothesis	Standardized Path Coefficient (β)	t-value	p (sig)	Supported	Result
Life Skills \rightarrow Psychological Capital	0.471	10.556	$p < 0.05$	Supported	Psychological capital plays a partial mediating role in the relationship between life skills and deviant behaviors.
Psychological Capital \rightarrow Deviant Behaviors	-0.427	9.355	$p < 0.05$	Supported	
Life Skills \rightarrow Deviant Behaviors	-0.195	3.936	$p < 0.05$	Supported	

Direct effect of life skills on deviant behaviors: $\beta = -0.195$, $t = 10.556$; Indirect effect via psychological capital: $\beta = -0.201$, $t = 6.983$; Total effect: $\beta = -0.396$.

As shown in Table 2, the structural model analysis indicated that life skills had a significant positive effect on psychological capital ($\beta = 0.471$, $t = 10.556$, $p < 0.05$). In turn, psychological capital had a significant negative effect on deviant behaviors ($\beta = -0.427$, $t = 9.355$, $p < 0.05$). Additionally, life skills directly and negatively influenced deviant behaviors ($\beta = -0.195$, $t = 3.936$, $p < 0.05$). The

indirect effect of life skills on deviant behaviors through psychological capital was also significant ($\beta = -0.201$, $t = 6.983$), resulting in a total effect of $\beta = -0.396$. These findings confirm that psychological capital partially mediates the relationship between life skills and deviant behaviors among students.

Figure 1

Model with Beta Values

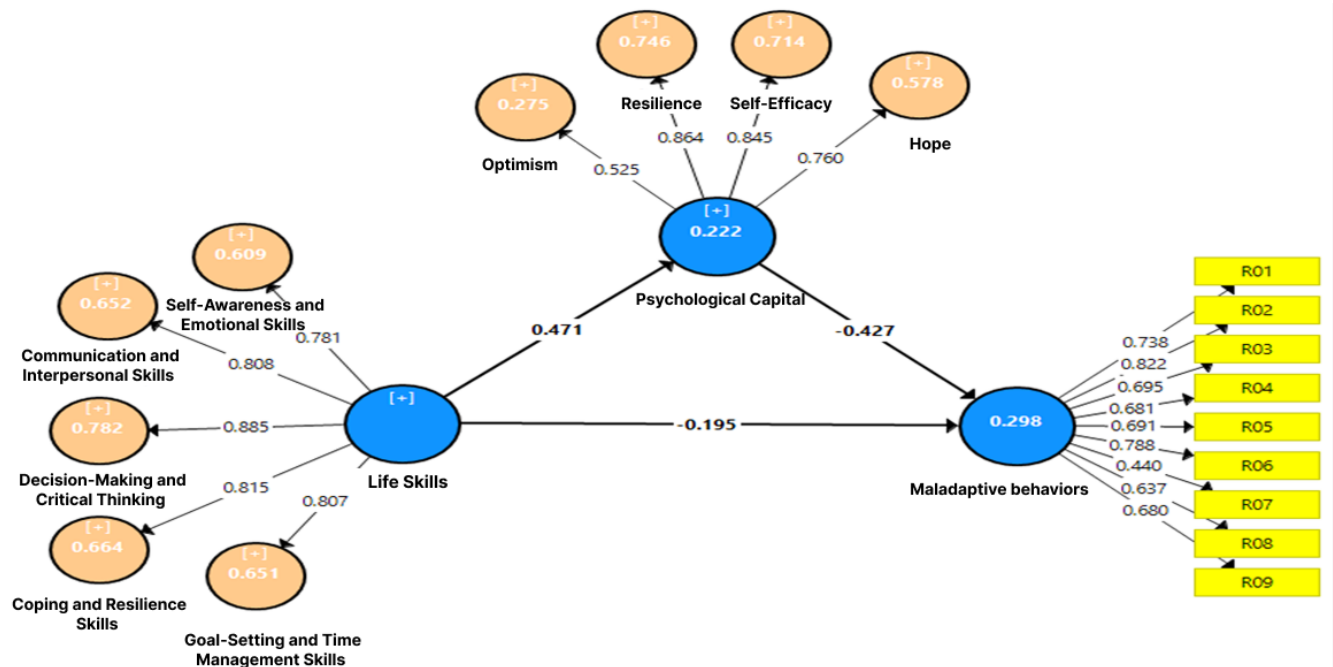
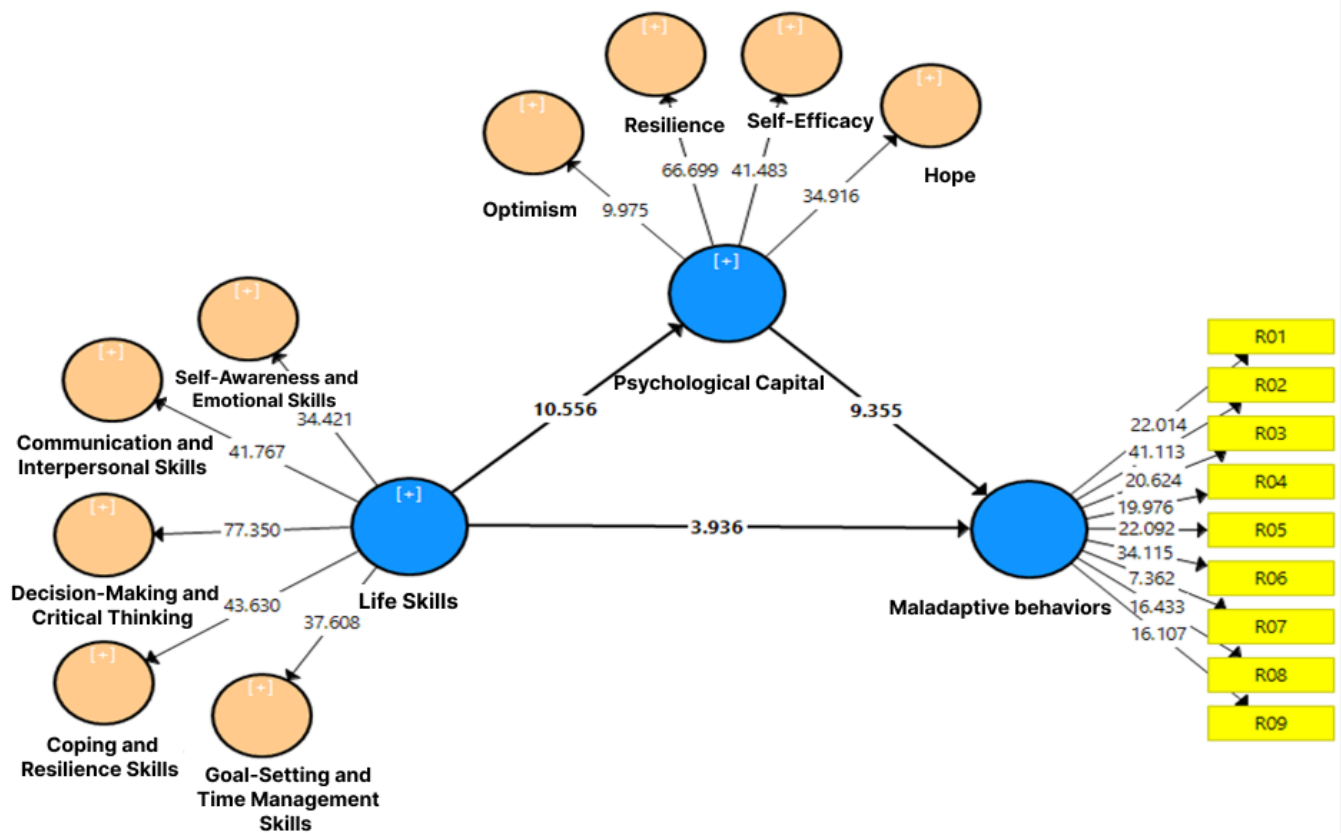


Figure 2

Model with T-Values



4. Discussion and Conclusion

The results of this study revealed that life skills exert a significant positive effect on psychological capital, which in turn has a significant negative effect on deviant behaviors among students. Moreover, life skills had a direct negative effect on deviant behaviors, while psychological capital played a partial mediating role in this relationship. These findings highlight the complementary role of life skills and psychological capital as protective factors that can reduce the tendency toward deviant behaviors during adolescence.

The positive relationship between life skills and psychological capital aligns with previous evidence indicating that psychosocial skill development strengthens core psychological resources such as hope, self-efficacy, resilience, and optimism. These four elements constitute the foundational structure of psychological capital, which functions as a positive psychological state enabling individuals to overcome challenges and achieve success (Luthans et al., 2007). Adolescents who acquire decision-making, emotional regulation, communication, and

problem-solving skills develop a greater sense of agency and control over their lives, which reinforces their confidence in managing obstacles and enhances their resilience in stressful contexts. This is consistent with the findings of (Ghadiri Nyari & Meshkbid Haghighi, 2022), who showed that life skills training significantly reduced psychological distress while improving psychological capital in patients with chronic conditions, suggesting that similar mechanisms can operate in adolescent populations. Furthermore, (Azadi Pour & Shoghi, 2023) found that cognitive flexibility—one of the competencies closely related to life skills—enhanced subjective well-being among high school students through the mediating role of wisdom, demonstrating how psychological competencies translate into broader psychological resources.

The negative relationship between psychological capital and deviant behaviors observed in this study also concurs with prior research indicating that adolescents with higher levels of psychological capital are less likely to engage in maladaptive or risky behaviors. Psychological capital fosters perseverance, optimism, and adaptive coping strategies, which act as buffers against environmental pressures and

internal vulnerabilities that often lead to deviance. For example, (Kanengoni et al., 2018) found that psychological capital predicted better work behavior outcomes and lower counterproductive behaviors among South African church ministers, while (Ortega-Maldonado & Salanova, 2018) reported that psychological capital predicted academic performance and satisfaction among undergraduate students, mediated by meaning-focused coping. In school settings, such positive psychological resources appear to provide students with the resilience and motivation to adhere to prosocial norms and academic expectations, reducing the appeal or necessity of deviant acts. The present results thus align with (Moreno-Montero et al., 2024), who highlighted that psychological capital and coping strategies jointly contribute to psychological well-being and reduce psychological distress in university students.

Furthermore, the finding that life skills had a direct negative effect on deviant behaviors supports the idea that equipping adolescents with psychosocial competencies reduces their vulnerability to external pressures and impulsive decision-making. This outcome corroborates a growing body of evidence demonstrating that life skills training reduces engagement in high-risk behaviors. For example, (Fallah et al., 2021) showed that structured life skills training significantly decreased adolescents' inclination toward risky behaviors in a randomized controlled trial, while (Rahimi et al., 2016) found that such training reduced risk behaviors among at-risk male high school students. Similarly, (Sheikhan et al., 2022) demonstrated that life skills training alleviated loneliness, depression, and aggressive behavior among adolescents of divorced families, and (Larni et al., 2021) found that life skills training reduced high-risk behaviors and psychopathological symptoms among female high school students. These findings collectively support the current study's conclusion that life skills can directly and meaningfully reduce deviant behaviors.

The present study also enriches the literature by showing that psychological capital partially mediates the relationship between life skills and deviant behaviors. This means that while life skills directly reduce deviant behaviors, they also indirectly do so by fostering psychological capital, which then diminishes the likelihood of deviance. This dual pathway underscores the synergistic relationship between these two constructs. (Saman & Wirawan, 2024) emphasized that psychological capital predicted students' soft skills and well-being across grade levels, suggesting that psychological capital can enhance the use and maintenance

of acquired life skills. (Santisi et al., 2020) similarly noted that psychological capital contributes to quality of life, especially when accompanied by courage, further supporting the idea that internal resources amplify the protective effect of acquired skills. Thus, the findings of this study confirm that interventions that simultaneously build life skills and psychological capital are likely to be more effective than those targeting either factor alone.

In addition, the observed patterns resonate with the notion that adolescents engaging in deviant behaviors often lack both psychosocial skills and psychological capital resources. (Zhang et al., 2024) reported that students at risk of internet addiction—a form of behavioral deviance—exhibited higher levels of deviant behaviors when family dysfunction and weak psychological resources were present. This highlights that external deficits (e.g., inadequate family support) and internal deficits (e.g., low psychological capital, weak life skills) often co-occur in adolescents with behavioral problems. (Shekofteh & Shahnaz, 2024) also noted that life skills are crucial for personality development, indicating that their absence may leave adolescents more susceptible to external negative influences. In this regard, (Kounkroo, 2025) argued that developing 21st-century life skills and career competencies among students enhances their adaptability and reduces disengagement, further suggesting that life skills indirectly protect against deviance by strengthening motivation and future orientation.

Moreover, the findings are consistent with research emphasizing that enhancing life skills and psychological capital during adolescence promotes broader developmental outcomes beyond the prevention of deviance. Life skills training contributes to emotional regulation, self-awareness, and interpersonal communication, which are fundamental for personal growth and healthy relationships (World Health, 1997). Psychological capital contributes to perseverance and adaptive coping even under adversity, as shown by (Chen & Lim, 2012), who found that psychological capital helped job seekers remain resilient during unemployment. Applying this framework to adolescents, building psychological capital can help them remain engaged with constructive behaviors even when facing academic failures, peer rejection, or other stressors. (Larni, 2025) provided evidence that life skills and mindfulness training together reduced risky behaviors and psychopathological symptoms, illustrating how combined approaches may produce synergistic effects. These patterns collectively affirm that the dual focus on life skills and psychological capital represents

a powerful approach to supporting adolescents' positive development and reducing deviant behaviors.

Overall, the findings of this study contribute to a nuanced understanding of the mechanisms by which life skills and psychological capital influence adolescent behavior. They demonstrate that life skills operate both as direct behavioral regulators and as antecedents to psychological capital, which then further strengthens adolescents' ability to resist deviance. This multi-layered protective effect underscores the importance of designing comprehensive school-based interventions that target both psychosocial skill-building and internal psychological resource development.

5. Limitations & Suggestions

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, its cross-sectional design limits the ability to make causal inferences about the relationships among life skills, psychological capital, and deviant behaviors. Longitudinal or experimental designs would provide stronger evidence of causality. Second, the study relied exclusively on self-report questionnaires, which may be influenced by social desirability bias or inaccurate self-assessment by adolescents. Third, the sample was drawn from students in one city, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other regions or cultural contexts. Fourth, although the study controlled for gender and grade-level differences through stratified sampling, it did not examine potential moderating effects of demographic factors such as socioeconomic status, parental education, or school type, which may influence both life skills development and psychological capital. Finally, while this study examined psychological capital as a single higher-order construct, future studies could benefit from analyzing its four components (hope, self-efficacy, resilience, and optimism) separately to identify which dimensions most strongly mediate the link between life skills and deviant behaviors.

Future research should employ longitudinal or experimental designs to clarify the causal pathways linking life skills, psychological capital, and deviant behaviors. It would be valuable to assess how these relationships evolve over time, especially across key developmental transitions such as the shift from lower to upper secondary school. Researchers should also explore potential moderating variables such as gender, socioeconomic status, family environment, and school climate to understand how contextual factors shape the effectiveness of life skills and

psychological capital. Expanding the sample to multiple cities and culturally diverse populations would enhance the external validity of findings. Moreover, future studies could investigate the impact of integrated interventions that explicitly target both life skills and psychological capital development, comparing them with single-focus programs. Including qualitative components such as interviews or focus groups may also yield richer insights into adolescents' subjective experiences of these constructs and how they perceive their influence on behavioral choices.

Practically, the findings highlight the importance of embedding structured life skills training within school curricula as a preventive strategy to reduce deviant behaviors. Educational policymakers and school psychologists should design programs that integrate both psychosocial skill-building and psychological capital development, emphasizing competencies such as emotional regulation, decision-making, problem-solving, and resilience. Teachers and school counselors can be trained to deliver these programs and to model the application of life skills in daily school contexts. Collaboration with parents is also essential to reinforce these competencies at home. Regular assessment and monitoring of students' psychological capital and life skills levels could help identify at-risk students early and provide targeted support. Such comprehensive, multi-component interventions could substantially contribute to fostering adaptive behaviors, reducing deviance, and promoting overall psychological well-being among adolescents.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this article.

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