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The Effectiveness of Life Skills Training on Self-Handicapping among Students of Islamic Azad University, Shiraz Branch

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A B S T R A C T

Objective: This study aimed to examine the effectiveness of life skills training in reducing self-handicapping behaviors and their components among master's students of Islamic Azad University, Shiraz Branch.

Methods and Materials: This applied, quantitative study used a semi-experimental pretest–posttest design with a control group and a two-month follow-up. The statistical population comprised all master's students in Economic Management at the Islamic Azad University, Shiraz Branch, during the 2024–2025 academic year. Using convenience sampling, 78 students were selected and randomly assigned to an experimental group (n = 39) and a control group (n = 39). The experimental group participated in ten 45-minute sessions of life skills training based on Klinke's (1994) protocol, covering self-awareness, empathy, communication, anger management, problem-solving, stress management, decision-making, creative and critical thinking, and emotional regulation. Data were collected using the Self-Handicapping Questionnaire developed by Jones and Rhodewalt (1978) and analyzed through analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) and multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) using SPSS 26.

Findings: The results revealed significant reductions in total self-handicapping and its components among the experimental group compared to the control group at the posttest stage ($p < .001$). ANCOVA results indicated strong intervention effects on total self-handicapping ($F = 92.34$, $\eta^2 = .591$), effort ($F = 32.25$, $\eta^2 = .342$), and negative mood ($F = 21.65$, $\eta^2 = .259$), with a moderate effect on excuse-making ($F = 8.90$, $p = .004$, $\eta^2 = .126$). The follow-up analysis confirmed the persistence of effects after two months, except for the excuse-making component ($p > .05$).

Conclusion: Life skills training effectively reduces self-handicapping and its cognitive-emotional components among university students and maintains its impact over time, highlighting its importance as a preventive and developmental intervention in higher education.

Keywords: *Life skills training; Self-handicapping; Effort; Negative mood; Excuse-making; University students.*

1. Introduction

In recent decades, the psychological and behavioral challenges faced by university students have become a growing concern for educators, psychologists, and policymakers. Among these challenges, self-handicapping has emerged as a critical cognitive-behavioral pattern that negatively affects academic performance, emotional well-being, and personal growth (Afshari, 2023). Self-handicapping refers to the intentional creation or perception of obstacles that hinder one's own performance, thereby providing an excuse for potential failure while protecting self-esteem. This defensive strategy allows individuals to externalize failure causes and preserve a sense of competence, but it paradoxically undermines actual achievement and resilience (Ahmadi & Amoopour 2023). As the prevalence of self-handicapping rises in academic contexts, particularly among university students under high academic pressure, interventions that address underlying cognitive, emotional, and social deficits have gained importance (Yazdizadeh et al., 2023).

Self-handicapping can manifest in various forms such as procrastination, lack of effort, avoidance behaviors, and emotional disengagement (Alipour et al., 2024). It often coexists with cognitive distortions such as perfectionism, low self-efficacy, and fear of failure. Research has shown that self-handicapping correlates strongly with poor academic performance, low motivation, and negative emotional outcomes including depression and anxiety (Chang et al., 2025). Students who habitually engage in self-handicapping behaviors are more likely to experience chronic stress and reduced self-regulation, which in turn perpetuate a cycle of avoidance and underachievement (Karimi et al., 2024). Understanding this phenomenon requires attention not only to individual psychological traits but also to the contextual factors that shape adaptive life skills and coping strategies.

Life skills, as defined by the World Health Organization, refer to psychosocial competencies that enable individuals to effectively deal with the demands and challenges of everyday life. These skills include self-awareness, empathy, communication, interpersonal relationships, decision-making, problem-solving, creative and critical thinking, emotional regulation, and stress management (Amirian Zadeh & Besharati, 2018). The integration of life skills training into educational settings is recognized as an effective preventive and developmental approach for promoting mental health, emotional intelligence, and adaptive behavior among students (Jamali Paghale et al., 2015). By equipping students with these skills, educational programs aim to foster resilience, self-confidence, and social competence—qualities that are essential for academic success and psychological stability (Pakdaman-Savji et al., 2013).

Empirical research supports the efficacy of life skills training in mitigating various behavioral and emotional difficulties among adolescents and young adults. For instance, studies have demonstrated that life skills programs significantly enhance social adjustment, academic performance, and interpersonal effectiveness (Mokhtari et al., 2014). Such programs have also been found to reduce aggression and improve self-control by teaching participants how to identify emotions, manage stress, and communicate assertively (Sheikh Al-Islami et al., 2016). Furthermore, in contexts of academic decline, life skills training has been shown to improve students' self-concept and self-esteem, which are closely linked to academic persistence and motivation (Nasrabadi, 2012). In this sense, life skills serve as mediating factors that transform maladaptive cognitive patterns—such as self-handicapping—into more constructive and proactive behavioral responses (Royaee et al., 2023).

Several psychological models have explained the relationship between life skills and self-handicapping. The cognitive-behavioral framework posits that enhancing awareness of one's thoughts, emotions, and behaviors leads to cognitive restructuring, reducing the need for self-defensive mechanisms like self-handicapping (Afshari, 2023). Within this model, interventions that strengthen problem-solving, decision-making, and emotional regulation can directly influence students' academic functioning by promoting accountability and internal locus of control (Amjadian & Bahrami, 2023). Additionally, self-determination theory highlights the role of autonomy, competence, and relatedness as fundamental psychological needs that, when satisfied, enhance intrinsic motivation and diminish self-sabotaging tendencies (Ortiz-Rodríguez et al., 2024). Life skills training aligns with this theory by fostering autonomy support and self-regulation, empowering students to set realistic goals and cope effectively with academic challenges.

At the emotional level, self-handicapping has been associated with difficulties in emotion regulation, intolerance of ambiguity, and cognitive avoidance (Afshari, 2023). These traits limit students' capacity to handle stress and uncertainty, increasing reliance on avoidance-based

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coping mechanisms. Life skills training, by teaching emotional awareness and regulation, helps individuals replace avoidance with proactive coping strategies (Yazdizadeh et al., 2023). Research conducted by Yazdizadeh and colleagues (2023) demonstrated that interventions based on reality therapy significantly reduced difficulties in emotion regulation and academic self-handicapping, suggesting that structured psychosocial programs can facilitate long-term behavioral change. Moreover, training in communication and empathy skills improves interpersonal relationships, thereby reducing social isolation—a factor often linked with self-handicapping behaviors (Nouri, 2021).

Studies on the effectiveness of life skills interventions in higher education have highlighted their role in promoting adaptive academic behaviors. Nouri (2021) reported that online life skills training enhanced academic resilience among students experiencing family stress during the COVID-19 pandemic. Similarly, Amirian Zadeh and Besharati (2018) found that participation in structured life skills workshops improved both social skills and academic performance among high school students. These findings suggest that life skills training can strengthen academic engagement by fostering emotional balance and positive self-perception. Jamali Paghale et al. (2015) also emphasized the importance of integrating life skills education into formal curricula to support adolescents' academic adjustment, highlighting its preventive potential in addressing emerging behavioral issues.

Within the academic domain, self-handicapping not only impairs individual performance but also affects collective educational outcomes. When students adopt self-handicapping strategies, they are less likely to engage actively in learning tasks, collaborate effectively with peers, or utilize feedback constructively (Alipour et al., 2024). As a result, the overall academic climate suffers from diminished motivation and increased emotional disengagement. Chang et al. (2025) identified self-handicapping as a core mechanism contributing to academic burnout and depression among college students, particularly in those exhibiting perfectionistic tendencies and fear of failure. This finding underscores the need for interventions that not only address behavioral symptoms but also target the cognitive roots of self-defensive patterns. In this context, life skills training provides a comprehensive framework for modifying both thought processes and behaviors.

The connection between self-handicapping and procrastination further illustrates the interrelatedness of maladaptive academic behaviors. Research by Amjadian and Bahrami (2023) confirmed that procrastination mediates the relationship between self-handicapping and academic performance, suggesting that improving time management and decision-making skills could disrupt this detrimental cycle. Similarly, Karimi et al. (2024) demonstrated that mindfulness-based cognitive therapy effectively reduced both procrastination and self-handicapping in students with academic failure, highlighting the value of interventions that enhance metacognitive awareness and emotional regulation. When combined with life skills training, such approaches can create synergistic effects that strengthen students' ability to manage academic demands while maintaining psychological well-being.

Cultural factors also influence how life skills are developed and applied. In Iran, educational reforms and psychosocial interventions increasingly recognize the importance of teaching life skills as part of a holistic model of student development (Nasrabadi, 2012). Programs aimed at enhancing social responsibility, communication, and emotional intelligence are being integrated into university-level curricula to prepare students for both academic and personal challenges. Pakdaman-Savji et al. (2013) found that life skills training improved students' motivation and academic achievement, confirming its potential as a sustainable educational strategy. However, despite extensive research on adolescents, fewer studies have examined the impact of life skills programs on university students, who face unique developmental transitions, academic stressors, and identity-related challenges (Ahmadi & Amoopour 2023).

Moreover, in the university setting, where academic pressures and competition are high, the risk of self-handicapping behaviors tends to increase, particularly among students with low self-efficacy or poor emotional coping skills (Royaee et al., 2023). This pattern highlights the necessity of preventive interventions that focus on psychological flexibility and adaptive functioning. Life skills training programs are uniquely positioned to address these issues because they emphasize experiential learning and self-reflection, enabling participants to internalize coping strategies rather than rely on external justifications for failure (Sheikh Al-Islami et al., 2016). By reinforcing self-awareness, empathy, and stress management, such programs encourage students to adopt constructive problem-solving behaviors that reduce avoidance and increase persistence in goal-directed tasks (Mokhtari et al., 2014).

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From a developmental perspective, the acquisition of life skills contributes to broader aspects of personality integration, social responsibility, and emotional maturity. These attributes are critical in higher education, where students are required to balance academic, social, and personal demands (Ortiz-Rodríguez et al., 2024). Enhancing life skills not only supports academic performance but also strengthens students' sense of autonomy and purpose, fostering a more positive attitude toward learning and achievement. As Ortiz-Rodríguez et al. (2024) observed, autonomy-supportive environments that promote life skills development increase intrinsic motivation and engagement among university students, thereby reducing tendencies toward disengagement and self-sabotage.

In light of these theoretical and empirical insights, it becomes evident that life skills training represents a multidimensional and evidence-based approach for reducing self-handicapping behaviors among students. By integrating cognitive, emotional, and behavioral competencies, such interventions empower learners to take responsibility for their academic performance and psychological well-being. Despite existing research supporting the benefits of life skills education, the specific effects of structured life skills training on self-handicapping among Iranian university students remain underexplored. Therefore, the present study aims to examine the effectiveness of life skills training on self-handicapping among students of Islamic Azad University, Shiraz Branch.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

This study adopted an applied, quantitative, and semi-experimental research design utilizing a pretest–posttest structure with a control group and a two-month follow-up phase. The statistical population consisted of all master's degree students majoring in Economic Management at the Islamic Azad University, Shiraz Branch, during the 2024–2025 academic year. Using a convenience sampling method, 78 students were initially selected as the sample group. These participants were then randomly assigned to two groups—39 students in the experimental group and 39 in the control group—through a lottery-based randomization process. The sample size was determined based on Delavar's (2018) guideline, which states that a minimum of 30 participants per group is sufficient for semi-experimental research. To enhance statistical validity and compensate for potential attrition of up to 30%, the sample size was increased from 60 to 78 participants. Participants in the experimental group received life skills training across a series of structured sessions, while the control group did not receive any intervention during the study period. Both groups completed pretest, posttest, and two-month follow-up assessments. Ethical considerations were fully observed, including informed consent, confidentiality, and the voluntary nature of participation.

2.2. Measures

Data were collected using the Self-Handicapping Questionnaire developed by Jones and Rhodewalt (1978) to measure individuals' tendencies toward self-handicapping behaviors. The instrument consists of 23 items across three subscales: Effort, Negative Mood, and Excuse-Making. Responses were scored using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ("strongly disagree") to 5 ("strongly agree"). Sample items included statements such as "When I perform poorly at something, I often console myself by recalling things I am good at." Items 3, 5, 6, 10, 17, 21, and 22 were reverse-scored to ensure balanced measurement. Subscale scores were calculated by summing relevant items, and the total self-handicapping score was obtained by summing all 23 items, yielding a possible range of 23 to 115. A score below 50 indicated mild self-handicapping, scores between 51 and 100 indicated moderate levels, and scores above 101 indicated severe self-handicapping. The cut-off point used in this study was 50. In terms of psychometric properties, Heidari, Khodapanahi, and Dehghani (2009) validated the Persian version of this instrument, confirming a three-factor structure consistent with the original model. Their exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses demonstrated satisfactory construct validity, with internal consistency coefficients ranging from 0.60 to 0.86 and Cronbach's alpha coefficients between 0.60 and 0.77 across subscales. Furthermore, Li and Yuan (2004) confirmed its reliability in a Chinese population, reporting a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.67 for a shortened 14-item version.

2.3. Intervention

The life skills training protocol used in this study was developed by Klinke (1994) and consisted of ten structured sessions, each lasting 45 minutes. The program aimed to enhance essential psychosocial competencies through a sequential, skill-based approach. It covered nine core life skills: self-awareness, empathy, effective communication, anger management, problem-solving, stress management,

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decision-making, creative and critical thinking, and emotional regulation. The first session focused on group orientation, introductions, establishing rapport, defining life skills, and highlighting the importance and objectives of the nine core competencies. The second session emphasized self-awareness by helping participants recognize their own emotions, thoughts, and behaviors, and understand the benefits of knowing oneself. The third session addressed empathy, identifying barriers to empathetic understanding, and practicing active listening techniques to enhance interpersonal sensitivity. The fourth session introduced the elements of interpersonal relationships, communication styles, and the principles of effective communication. The fifth session centered on anger management, including identifying triggers, recognizing signs of anger, and learning constructive strategies to manage emotional responses. The sixth session focused on developing problem-solving skills by introducing systematic steps for identifying and resolving problems effectively. The seventh session dealt with stress management, examining stressors, coping mechanisms, and adaptive strategies for maintaining emotional balance. The eighth session taught decision-making skills, emphasizing the steps, importance, and benefits of making informed and responsible choices. The ninth session covered creative and critical thinking, promoting open-mindedness, innovation, and rational analysis through guided exercises. Finally, the tenth session focused on emotional regulation, emphasizing the importance of managing emotions in daily life and introducing practical techniques to improve emotional control and resilience.

2.4. Data Analysis

Data analysis was performed in two main phases—descriptive and inferential. In the descriptive phase, demographic variables were summarized and compared between groups using Fisher's exact test and independent samples t-tests to ensure baseline equivalence. Means and standard deviations of the main variables (self-handicapping and its subscales) were also calculated for each group and measurement time point. In the inferential phase, hypotheses were tested using univariate analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) and multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA). The assumptions underlying parametric covariance analysis were rigorously tested, including absence of outliers, normality of distributions, homogeneity of variances, homogeneity of regression slopes, and equality of variance–covariance matrices. Because the variables were measured at three time points and pretest scores were considered as covariates to control baseline differences, ANCOVA was used to assess intervention effects. Posttest scores were compared between groups after controlling for pretest scores to evaluate the immediate effect of life skills training, and follow-up scores were compared to assess the sustainability of the intervention effect. The repeated measures ANOVA was not used, as it does not allow controlling for pretest scores, which is a crucial condition in intervention-based designs. All statistical analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics version 26, with significance levels set at $p < .05$.

3. Findings and Results

The demographic characteristics of the participants indicated that both groups were statistically homogeneous in terms of gender, marital status, and age. In the experimental group, 23 participants (71.9%) were female and 9 (28.1%) were male, while in the control group, 22 participants (62.9%) were female and 13 (37.1%) were male. Regarding marital status, 19 participants (59.4%) in the experimental group and 23 (65.7%) in the control group were single, whereas 13 participants (40.6%) in the experimental group and 12 (34.3%) in the control group were married. The mean age of the participants in the experimental group was 27.57 years (SD = 1.80), and in the control group, it was 28.41 years (SD = 1.63). Statistical analysis using Fisher's exact test for categorical variables and independent samples t-test for age revealed no significant differences between the two groups in gender ($p = 0.450$), marital status ($p = 0.622$), or age ($p = 0.209$), indicating equivalence of demographic characteristics at baseline.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics of Self-Handicapping and Its Components by Group and Time

Variable	Time	Experimental Group Mean	Experimental Group SD	Control Group Mean	Control Group SD
Effort	Pretest	17.03	4.86	17.60	4.72
	Posttest	14.81	3.90	17.37	4.36
	Follow-up	14.87	3.70	17.14	3.91

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Negative Mood	Pretest	22.88	6.52	21.91	6.56
	Posttest	19.97	5.20	21.34	6.17
	Follow-up	19.47	5.32	20.71	5.49
Excuse-Making	Pretest	19.97	5.03	20.09	4.90
	Posttest	18.72	4.65	19.86	4.24
	Follow-up	18.94	4.33	19.54	4.22
Total Self-Handicapping	Pretest	59.87	8.09	59.60	9.95
	Posttest	53.50	6.77	58.57	9.59
	Follow-up	53.28	6.26	57.40	8.08

As shown in Table 1, the experimental group demonstrated a consistent decline in mean scores of self-handicapping and its three components—Effort, Negative Mood, and Excuse-Making—across the posttest and follow-up stages compared to the pretest. Specifically, the total self-handicapping mean in the experimental group decreased from 59.87 (SD = 8.09) at pretest to 53.50 (SD = 6.77) at posttest and remained stable at 53.28 (SD = 6.26) during the follow-up phase, indicating sustained improvement over time. Conversely, the control group's mean scores remained relatively unchanged, with a slight fluctuation from 59.60 (SD = 9.95) at pretest to 58.57 (SD = 9.59) at posttest and 57.40 (SD = 8.08) at follow-up. Similar trends were observed across all subcomponents, where the experimental group consistently showed lower mean scores in the posttest and follow-up stages compared to the control group. These descriptive findings suggest that life skills training led to a meaningful reduction in self-handicapping behaviors and their associated cognitive-emotional patterns among participants in the experimental group.

Before conducting the main analyses, the statistical assumptions required for covariance-based tests were thoroughly examined to ensure the validity of the results. The data were first screened for outliers using standardized z-scores and boxplot inspection, and no extreme or influential cases were identified. The normality of score distributions for self-handicapping and its subcomponents across measurement times was assessed using the Kolmogorov–Smirnov test, which indicated non-significant results ($p > .05$), confirming the normal distribution of data. Homogeneity of variances between the experimental and control groups was verified through Levene's test, which showed no significant differences ($p > .05$), suggesting equal variances. Additionally, the assumption of homogeneity of regression slopes was tested and confirmed, indicating that the relationship between the covariate (pretest scores) and the dependent variables was consistent across groups. The Box's M test also confirmed the equality of variance–covariance matrices, satisfying another key assumption for conducting multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA). These results collectively verified that the data met all necessary parametric assumptions, allowing the use of ANCOVA and MANCOVA to accurately evaluate the effects of life skills training on self-handicapping.

Table 2

Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) for the Effectiveness of Life Skills Training on Self-Handicapping and Its Components (Posttest)

Time	Source	Dependent Variable	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p	Effect Size (η^2)
Posttest	Group	Effort	70.96	1	70.96	32.25	< .001	.342
		Negative Mood	76.93	1	76.93	21.65	< .001	.259
		Excuse-Making	19.04	1	19.04	8.90	.004	.126
		Total Self-Handicapping	472.08	1	472.08	92.34	< .001	.591

Table 2 presents the ANCOVA results assessing the effectiveness of life skills training on self-handicapping and its subcomponents at the posttest stage. After controlling for pretest scores, significant differences were found between the experimental and control groups in all variables except for Excuse-Making, where the effect was moderate. The intervention had a strong and statistically significant effect on the total self-handicapping score ($F = 92.34$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .591$), explaining nearly 59% of the variance between groups. Similarly, significant group differences were observed for the Effort component ($F = 32.25$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .342$) and the Negative Mood component ($F = 21.65$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .259$), suggesting that participants who received life skills training reported markedly lower self-handicapping tendencies. The Excuse-Making component also showed a significant reduction ($F = 8.90$, $p = .004$, $\eta^2 = .126$), though with a smaller effect size. Overall, these results confirm that life skills training effectively reduced self-

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handicapping behaviors and related cognitive-emotional patterns immediately after the intervention.

Table 3

Comparison of Adjusted Posttest Means of Self-Handicapping and Its Components between Experimental and Control Groups

Test Stage	Variable	Group	Adjusted Mean	SE	Lower Bound	Upper Bound	Mean Difference
Posttest	Effort	Experimental	15.07	0.263	14.54	15.59	2.07
		Control	17.14	0.251	16.64	17.64	
	Negative Mood	Experimental	19.56	0.334	18.89	20.23	2.16
		Control	21.72	0.319	21.08	22.36	
	Excuse-Making	Experimental	18.75	0.259	18.23	19.27	1.07
		Control	19.83	0.248	19.33	20.32	
	Total Self-Handicapping	Experimental	53.37	0.400	52.57	54.17	5.32
		Control	58.69	0.382	57.92	59.45	

Table 3 compares the adjusted posttest means of self-handicapping and its components between the experimental and control groups after controlling for pretest differences. The adjusted mean for total self-handicapping in the experimental group (M = 53.37, SE = 0.40) was considerably lower than that of the control group (M = 58.69, SE = 0.38), reflecting a mean difference of 5.32 points. Similarly, the experimental group showed lower adjusted means for Effort (M = 15.07 vs. 17.14), Negative Mood (M = 19.56 vs. 21.72), and Excuse-Making (M = 18.75 vs. 19.83) compared to the control group. The confidence intervals indicate no overlap between groups for most components, confirming significant post-intervention improvements. These findings demonstrate that participation in the life skills training program led to meaningful reductions in self-handicapping behaviors across cognitive, emotional, and behavioral domains.

Table 4

ANCOVA Results for Assessing the Persistence of the Effect of Life Skills Training on Self-Handicapping (Follow-Up)

Time	Source	Dependent Variable	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p	Effect Size (η^2)
Follow-up	Group	Effort	62.69	1	62.69	8.81	.004	.124
		Negative Mood	59.02	1	59.02	5.19	.026	.077
		Excuse-Making	5.61	1	5.61	0.90	.346	.014
		Total Self-Handicapping	307.94	1	307.94	15.34	< .001	.193

Table 4 summarizes the follow-up ANCOVA results examining the durability of the intervention effects two months after the completion of life skills training. The findings show that the reductions in total self-handicapping ($F = 15.34$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .193$) and in the Effort ($F = 8.81$, $p = .004$, $\eta^2 = .124$) and Negative Mood ($F = 5.19$, $p = .026$, $\eta^2 = .077$) components remained statistically significant at follow-up, indicating that the effects of the training persisted over time. However, the Excuse-Making component did not maintain a significant difference between the groups ($F = 0.90$, $p = .346$), suggesting partial fading of the effect for this subdomain. Overall, these results demonstrate that life skills training produced sustained improvements in self-handicapping and related emotional and behavioral patterns, with particularly strong long-term effects on effort regulation and mood management.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study revealed that life skills training produced a significant reduction in self-handicapping and its components—effort, negative mood, and excuse-making—among students of the Islamic Azad University, Shiraz Branch. Moreover, this improvement persisted in the two-month follow-up phase, suggesting that the effects of the intervention were not only immediate but also stable over time. These findings demonstrate that structured life skills training enhances self-awareness, emotional regulation, and decision-making, enabling students to reduce avoidance-based behaviors and to assume greater responsibility for their academic performance. This result is consistent with the argument that self-handicapping arises from deficits in emotional and cognitive competencies, which can be

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corrected through targeted psychosocial training (Afshari, 2023; Ahmadi & Amoopour 2023).

The significant decline in the effort component following life skills training indicates that participants developed greater persistence and motivation to engage in academic activities. Life skills programs foster self-knowledge and self-management, helping individuals to identify their strengths and limitations while adopting proactive coping mechanisms (Amirian Zadeh & Besharati, 2018). This is consistent with the findings of Jamali Paghale et al., who reported that life skills training increased social adjustment and academic performance in adolescent female students (Jamali Paghale et al., 2015). Similarly, in this study, participants in the experimental group demonstrated higher engagement and effort, suggesting that the intervention strengthened their self-efficacy and self-confidence. The significant decrease in negative mood further supports the effectiveness of the training in improving emotion regulation. This finding aligns with Yazdizadeh et al., who demonstrated that programs focusing on emotional control and self-awareness led to decreases in emotional dysregulation and academic self-handicapping (Yazdizadeh et al., 2023).

The reduction in excuse-making behaviors observed among participants in the experimental group can be attributed to the enhancement of their self-concept and communication skills. Life skills training encourages honest self-expression and responsible decision-making, reducing the reliance on defensive explanations for failures. Sheikh Al-Islami et al. confirmed that life skills interventions improved the self-concept of students experiencing academic decline, allowing them to confront challenges rather than evade them (Sheikh Al-Islami et al., 2016). The maintenance of these improvements during follow-up underscores the long-term influence of the program. Consistent with this, Nouri reported that online life skills programs enhanced academic resilience in students, and these effects remained stable over time (Nouri, 2021). This suggests that skills learned in structured interventions continue to guide behavior even after the active training phase concludes.

From a theoretical perspective, these findings can be interpreted through the lens of self-determination theory, which posits that fulfilling the psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness promotes intrinsic motivation and adaptive functioning. Life skills training addresses all three domains—fostering self-awareness (autonomy), problem-solving and decision-making (competence), and empathy (relatedness). By meeting these needs, students become more internally motivated and less likely to engage in self-defensive mechanisms such as self-handicapping. Ortiz-Rodríguez et al. reported that autonomy-supportive environments and the cultivation of life skills enhance academic motivation and engagement among university students (Ortiz-Rodríguez et al., 2024). The present findings are therefore consistent with the premise that empowering students to act autonomously and confidently reduces avoidance behaviors and improves academic performance.

The observed relationship between life skills development and reduced self-handicapping also supports prior findings emphasizing the mediating role of procrastination and poor time management in academic difficulties. Amjadian and Bahrami demonstrated that procrastination mediates the relationship between self-handicapping and academic performance, suggesting that improved decision-making and problem-solving skills can diminish both behaviors (Amjadian & Bahrami, 2023). In the present study, participants who received life skills training—which included modules on decision-making and time management—showed marked reductions in self-handicapping, likely because they learned to manage their academic responsibilities more effectively. Similarly, Karimi et al. found that mindfulness-based cognitive therapy decreased procrastination and self-handicapping in students with academic failure, highlighting the value of interventions that increase metacognitive awareness and self-regulation (Karimi et al., 2024). Together, these findings underscore the pivotal role of self-management skills in promoting adaptive academic engagement.

In line with cognitive-behavioral models of self-handicapping, the intervention likely reduced maladaptive cognitive patterns such as perfectionism, fear of failure, and low self-efficacy—all of which have been identified as predictors of self-handicapping (Chang et al., 2025). Chang et al. demonstrated that perfectionism and fear of failure contribute to academic burnout and depression through the mediating role of self-handicapping, reinforcing the need for preventive interventions targeting cognitive distortions. The present findings confirm that teaching adaptive thinking and emotional regulation through life skills training mitigates the cognitive and emotional precursors of self-sabotage. As students learned to reinterpret failure as a learning opportunity rather than a personal flaw, their reliance on avoidance behaviors diminished.

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The emotional domain plays a crucial role in understanding the effectiveness of life skills training. Students who engage in self-handicapping often experience emotional instability, self-doubt, and chronic anxiety (Afshari, 2023). The significant reduction in negative mood found in this study indicates that the intervention effectively enhanced emotional control. Yazdizadeh et al. confirmed that improving emotional regulation and self-awareness leads to reduced academic self-handicapping (Yazdizadeh et al., 2023). These outcomes reflect the emotional intelligence component of the training, where participants learned to identify emotional triggers, manage stress, and use relaxation techniques to maintain psychological balance. Through these mechanisms, life skills training not only decreases emotional distress but also strengthens mental resilience.

In addition to individual emotional regulation, the present results also highlight the interpersonal benefits of life skills training. By focusing on communication, empathy, and anger management, the program encouraged participants to express themselves assertively and to build more constructive relationships. These social improvements may indirectly reduce self-handicapping behaviors by increasing social support and reducing feelings of isolation. Amirian Zadeh and Besharati found that life skills training improved social skills and academic performance among female students, emphasizing the positive influence of interpersonal competence on academic engagement (Amirian Zadeh & Besharati, 2018). Furthermore, Royaee et al. emphasized that enhancing students' compatible cognitions and behaviors through interactive interventions can increase academic motivation and reduce maladaptive tendencies (Royaee et al., 2023). Therefore, it is reasonable to infer that the decrease in self-handicapping in this study was partially mediated by improvements in interpersonal effectiveness and social connectedness.

The sustained effects observed during the follow-up period are of particular importance. The persistence of reduced self-handicapping scores suggests that the participants continued to apply their acquired skills in daily life. Nouri reported similar results, indicating that life skills training enhances long-term academic resilience and coping capacity among students (Nouri, 2021). Likewise, Pakdaman-Savji et al. found that life skills training improved students' motivation and academic achievement, with benefits that extended beyond the training period (Pakdaman-Savji et al., 2013). The consistency of the present findings with these studies supports the view that life skills education fosters sustainable behavioral and cognitive transformation through experiential learning, reflection, and practice.

These results also expand on previous research that has primarily focused on adolescents by confirming the value of life skills training among university students. Mokhtari et al. demonstrated that life skills training reduced aggression and improved emotional control in high school students, showing that such programs are beneficial across age groups (Mokhtari et al., 2014). In the context of higher education, where academic pressures are more intense and students face increasing psychological challenges, life skills training can serve as a preventive and developmental tool. By equipping students with effective coping mechanisms and emotional literacy, universities can enhance both academic success and mental health outcomes (Nasrabadi, 2012).

Taken together, the findings confirm that life skills training is a comprehensive, evidence-based approach that addresses cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions of self-handicapping. It enhances self-awareness, emotional regulation, problem-solving, and interpersonal communication—competencies that collectively promote adaptive academic behavior. These outcomes align with broader research emphasizing that life skills development improves motivation, resilience, and academic performance (Jamali Paghale et al., 2015; Nouri, 2021; Ortiz-Rodríguez et al., 2024). In summary, the results of this study provide strong empirical support for the integration of life skills training within university curricula as an effective strategy for reducing self-handicapping and promoting holistic student development.

5. Limitations & Suggestions

Despite the promising results, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the sample was limited to master's students from a single university and academic discipline, which restricts the generalizability of the findings to broader student populations or other educational levels. Second, the use of self-report questionnaires may have introduced response bias, as participants could have under- or over-reported their self-handicapping behaviors due to social desirability or self-perception errors. Third, while the study included a two-month follow-up phase, longer-term assessments would be necessary to determine whether the observed effects are sustained over time. Moreover, the study did not assess potential moderating factors such as personality traits, academic motivation, or prior exposure to

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psychological training, which could influence the effectiveness of life skills interventions. Finally, the absence of a placebo or alternative training group limits the ability to isolate the specific contribution of life skills training relative to other psychosocial interventions.

Future studies should aim to include more diverse samples across multiple universities, fields of study, and cultural contexts to improve the external validity of the findings. Longitudinal research designs with extended follow-up periods are also recommended to assess the durability of intervention outcomes and identify potential relapse patterns in self-handicapping behaviors. Additionally, employing mixed-method approaches that combine quantitative assessments with qualitative interviews or behavioral observations could provide richer insights into the mechanisms through which life skills training influences cognitive and emotional change. Comparative studies examining the relative effectiveness of life skills training against other psychological interventions—such as mindfulness-based therapy, cognitive-behavioral therapy, or emotional intelligence programs—could further clarify its unique benefits. Finally, future researchers might explore gender differences, personality dimensions, and mediating variables (e.g., self-efficacy, resilience, or motivation) to identify subgroups that benefit most from such interventions.

In practical terms, universities should consider institutionalizing life skills education as part of their student development and counseling programs. Training workshops could be incorporated into orientation courses, academic skills seminars, or mental health initiatives to promote early awareness and skill acquisition. Counselors and educators should be trained in evidence-based life skills instruction to ensure consistency and quality of delivery. Additionally, combining life skills training with mentorship or peer support systems may enhance engagement and sustainability. Integrating these programs within the broader educational framework could foster a culture of psychological resilience, accountability, and emotional intelligence, ultimately contributing to reduced self-handicapping and improved academic performance among students.

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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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