

## Exploring the Moderating Role of Personality in the Relationship between Self Affirmation Intervention, Hope and Optimism among Undergraduates

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### ABSTRACT

Background: Undergraduate students face significant amount of stress that results in poor academic performance and decline in wellbeing. Self-Affirmation interventions are brief, cost effective strategies that help in developing positive psychological resources. Objective: To find whether OCEAN personality traits moderate the effect of Self-Affirmation on Hope and Optimism in Psychological Capital framework among undergraduates. Method: Quasi-experimental between-subjects design was used, 200 Participants between 18-25 years were recruited from Amity University, Jaipur. On day 1 participants of both groups completed NEO-FFI, Hope and Optimism sub-scales of CPC-12R. Immediately after the pre-test and before post-test on day 3, a Self-Affirmation writing task was given to intervention group participants. No intervention was provided to the control group participants on either day, they completed CPC-12R on day 3. Moderation analysis for personality traits was done using PROCESS Macro Model 1 (Hayes, 2022). Results: Hope analysis revealed no significant moderation effect of OCEAN traits. For Optimism, moderation model was significant ( $R^2 = .763$ ,  $p < .001$ ), group and Openness to experience interaction was found significant ( $b = 0.091$ ,  $p = .012$ ). Conclusion: Findings suggest that personality traits such as Openness to Experience may influence the effect of Self-Affirmation intervention on Optimism...

**Keywords:** Self-affirmation, Hope, Optimism, Openness to experience, Undergraduates.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Higher education is a transformative phase in an individual's life that offers long term benefits such as better life expectancy and health outcomes (Montez & Bisesti, 2024; Montez & Hayward, 2014; Cutler & Lleras-Muney, 2006). Beyond health and life expectancy higher education is also associated with greater emotional well-being (Lee & Yang, 2022) and better mental health outcomes (Magakwe et al., 2025). Despite the benefits it offers, it can also be a source of considerable stress and psychological distress. The transition to college requires adapting to new social environment and social situations that challenge their emotional wellbeing (Richardson et al., 2012; Ibrahim et al., 2013). Several studies have identified some common stressors that students face such as parental expectations, academic course load, financial situation, relationship difficulties (Karyotaki et al., 2020; Hunt & Eisenberg, 2010; Jessop, Herberts & Solomon, 2005; Kessler et al., 1995). Being exposed to these stressors lead to higher levels of anxiety (Tan et al., 2023; Blanco et al., 2008), depression (Farabaugh et al., 2012) and burnout (Liu et al., 2023) which in turn contributes to poor academic performance (Chong, Foo & Chua, 2025), low motivation (Chawla & Kumari, 2024) and decline in overall well-being (Barbayannis et al., 2022; Slimmen et al., 2022).

These challenges highlight the growing need for developing inner psychological resources in students that will help them in dealing with these stressors effectively. Psychological Capital is a positive psychology construct that consists of four state-like, developable psychological resources such as Hope, Efficacy, Resilience and Optimism (Luthans et al., 2015; Newman et al., 2014). Within this framework Hope and Optimism have been defined as state-like psychological resources that can be developed (Luthans et al., 2015). It has been found in several researches that higher Psychological Capital is linked with greater academic engagement (Martines et al., 2019), adjustment (Hazan-Liran & Miller, 2022) and achievement (Martinez et al., 2019; Luthans et al., 2012), lower burnout.

(Liu & Meng, 2025; Li & Saharuddin, 2023) and enhanced psychological well-being among students (Wang & Siu, 2023; Poots & Cassidy, 2020). Given the role of Psychological Capital in improving students' life, it is important to find brief, cost-effective and practical intervention that enhances these psychological resources. Since its conception, research over the past few years has identified Self-Affirmation as one such intervention that is brief, practical and cost-effective (Li et al., 2025; Escobar-Soler et al., 2023). It has been found effective in improving academic performance (Yang et al., 2023) and well-being (Zhang & Wang, 2025; Pandey, Tiwari & Rai, 2021) in students. The concept of Self-affirmation originated in the theory of self-affirmation by Steele (1988). The theory posits that an individual strives to maintain a positive global self-concept. When this self-concept is threatened due to several stressors an individual experiences distress and strives to achieve equilibrium (Steele, 1988). This can be achieved either directly or by affirming a domain other than the one that is being threatened (Steele, 1988).

Previous research has found relations between personality traits and the outcomes of the interventions (Mertens et al., 2022; Cerino & Dodge, 2020; Stoltz et al., 2013; Huppert et al., 2010). Bucher et al., (2019) in their Meta-analytic review, found that there is a meaningful and clinically useful association between personality traits and psychotherapy outcomes regardless of the intervention. However, this moderating influence has not been studied well in the context of self-affirmation interventions and how it shapes its outcomes.

Despite the evidence for the effectiveness of self-affirmation intervention, benefits of good Psychological Capital in student population there is limited research examining the relationship between the two and how Big Five traits moderate this relationship. Therefore, the present study aims to understand whether the OCEAN personality traits moderate the effect of self-affirmation intervention on Hope and Optimism among undergraduates.

## 2. METHODS AND MATERIAL

### Research design

A Quasi-experimental between-subjects research design was applied to assess the moderating effect of personality traits on the relationship between Self-Affirmation intervention, Hope and Optimism.

### Participants

The final sample for this study was 200 undergraduate students recruited through purposive sampling from several academic departments of Amity University Jaipur, Rajasthan. The participants were assigned equally to control and intervention group non-randomly. Total participants of the study had a mean age of 20.54 (SD=1.71), mean age in female participants was 20.42 (SD=1.75) and male participants had mean age of 20.84 (SD=1.55). A written informed consent was provided to every participant in order to take their consent and inform about the nature, Duration, associated risks and benefits of the study.

### Inclusion criteria

- \*Between 18-25 years of age
- \*Full-time Undergraduate student
- \*Fluency in English

### Exclusion criteria

- \*Missing data on either days (day 1 or day 3)
- \*Irrelevant responses in the writing task such as extremely short answers and off-topic responses.
- \*Past history of psychiatric consultation
- \*Presence of a serious physical illness

### Study measures

#### Demographic details form

Before the baseline assessments every participant completed the demographic details form consisting of basic details such as age, gender, socio-economic status etc.

#### NEO-five factor inventory (NEO-FFI)

Costa and McCrae (1992) developed the NEO-FFI which is a standardised self-report tool for measuring five personality traits: Neuroticism, Extroversion, Openness to Experience, Conscientiousness and Agreeableness. There are a total of 60 items in the inventory, wherein 12 items are assigned for every trait. Each item can be rated on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from "Strongly Disagree"=0 to "Strongly Agree"=4. Some items have reversed scoring and scores are divided into 4 categories provided in the norm table: very high, high, average, low and very low. The NEO-FFI has shown high internal consistency across all domains with Cronbach's alpha ranging from .75 to .82 (McCrae & Costa, 2004).

### Compound Psychological Capital scale (CPC-12R)

The CPC-12R scale was developed in 2021 by Dudasova et al., consisting of 12 items related to the core components of psychological capital: Hope, Self-efficacy, Resilience and Optimism.

Each item is rated using a 6-point Likert scale with possible responses ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Higher scores indicate better psychological capital. This scale has shown high internal consistency ( $\alpha, \omega > .89$ ) and has a strong concurrent validity with Psychological Capital questionnaire ( $r = .79$ ).

#### Procedure

The study was executed over two sessions on day 1 and day 3.

On day 1 participants of both groups completed NEO-FFI, Hope and Optimism sub-scales of CPC-12R. The intervention group was given Self-Affirmation intervention soon after the baseline assessments, which consisted of a writing task based on the previous researches. Participants in the intervention group were asked to write about an important area of their life that makes them proud, how it makes them feel about themselves and when was it useful to them.

On day 3, the control group completed the Hope and Optimism sub-scales of CPC-12R, while the intervention group wrote another Self-Affirmation essay. Immediately after the writing task the intervention group also completed the Hope and Optimism sub-scales of CPC-12R.

#### Data analysis

Data was analysed using SPSS version 25 and the PROCESS Macro v4.2 for SPSS (Model 1) (Hayes, 2022). Moderation analysis was done separately for Hope and Optimism as dependent variables, with Self-Affirmation condition (0 = control, 1 = intervention) entered as the predictor (X) and each Big Five personality trait as a moderator (W) in five separate models.

Baseline scores (Hope and Optimism<sub>1</sub>) were included as covariates to statistically control for pre-intervention differences. All analyses were conducted using HC3 robust standard errors and 5000 bootstrap samples. Interaction effects ( $X \times W$ ) were probed using simple slopes analysis at  $-1$  SD, mean, and  $+1$  SD of the moderator, and where relevant, the Johnson-Neyman technique was used to identify regions of statistical significance.

### 3. RESULTS

To examine whether personality traits moderated the effect of Self-Affirmation on Hope and Optimism, moderation analysis was done using PROCESS Model 1 (Hayes, 2022) controlling for baseline levels.

**Table 1**

*Summary of Moderation effects on hope across personality traits*

Moderator	B	SE	P	R <sup>2</sup>
Openness	0.0607	0.0502	.228	.0048
Conscientiousness	-0.0613	0.0315	0.53	.0091
Extraversion	-0.0984	0.0539	.069	.0125
Agreeableness	0.0247	0.0413	.508	.0009
Neuroticism	0.0517	0.0483	.286	.0047

*Note.* b=interaction coefficient (Group \*trait); p= significance of interaction; R<sup>2</sup>=variance explained by interaction. All models controlled for baseline Hope using HC3 robust Standard errors and 5000 bootstrap samples.

Table 1 shows that self affirmation intervention showed a consistent positive main effect on Hope (b = .57-.61, all p<.05) across all five moderation models, with models explaining a substantial share of variance (R<sup>2</sup> ≈ .50-.52). Openness, Neuroticism and agreeableness did not moderate this effect (all interaction ps > .22), which indicates that the increase in Hope was comparable across the traits. For extroversion and conscientiousness, the interaction term suggested a possible

tendency that the lower levels of these traits may be associated with greater increase in Hope following Self-Affirmation intervention. However these effects were not statistically significant ( $p = .069$  and  $p = .053$  respectively). These findings indicate that self affirmation intervention showed a greater increase in Hope irrespective of levels and type of OCEAN personality traits.

**Table 2**

*Conditional effects of Self-Affirmation on Optimism (day 3) at different levels of Openness*

Openness	B	SE	T	P	95%CI
-1 SD (low)	-0.1351	0.2929	-0.46	.645	[0.71, 0.44]
Mean (Average)	0.3703	0.2039	1.81	.071	[-0.03, 0.77]
+1 SD (High)	0.8757	0.2906	3.01	<b>.0029</b>	[-0.30, 1.44]

*Note.* b = unstandardized regression coefficient; p =significance level for conditional effect. All models controlled for baseline optimism using HC3 robust Standard errors and 5000 bootstrap samples.

**Table 3**

*Summary of Moderation effects on optimism across personality traits (Excluding openness)*

Moderator	B	SE	P	R <sup>2</sup>
Conscientiousness	-0.0131	0.0276	.637	.0003
Extraversion	-0.0214	0.0447	.632	.0005
Agreeableness	-0.0225	0.0323	.486	.0005
Neuroticism	-0.0051	0.0349	.884	.0000

*Note.* b = interaction coefficient (Group \*trait); p= significance of interaction; R<sup>2</sup>=variance explained by interaction. All models controlled for baseline Hope using HC3 robust Standard errors and 5000 bootstrap samples.

Moderation analysis was conducted for Optimism across all personality traits (Table 2 & Table 3). While controlling for baseline Optimism, the intervention significantly increased Optimism (b range = 0.39–0.42, all  $p < .05$ ) across all models.

Table 2 shows the conditional effects of Self-Affirmation on Optimism at different levels of Openness using process model 1.

A significant moderation effect was found for Openness ( $b = 0.0888$ ,  $p = .016$ ) which indicates that the effectiveness of the Self-Affirmation intervention in increasing Optimism depended on levels of Openness.

Simple slope analysis showed that the intervention significantly increased Optimism for participants high in Openness (+1 SD;  $b = 0.8757$ ,  $p = .0029$ ), whereas no significant effect was observed for those low in Openness (–1 SD;  $b = -0.1351$ ,  $p = .645$ ). Johnson–Neyman analysis indicated that the effect of the intervention became statistically significant when Openness exceeded approximately 0.36 SD above the mean, suggesting that higher Openness lead to a more positive response to the intervention. In other words, self affirmation intervention became more effective when Openness to experience increased beyond slightly above sample average,

Table 3 shows moderation of Self-Affirmation intervention on Optimism across the remaining personality traits. It was found that Neuroticism ( $p = .884$ ), Conscientiousness ( $p = .637$ ), Agreeableness ( $p = .486$ ), and Extraversion ( $p = .632$ ) did not have a moderation effect on the relationship between Self-Affirmation and Optimism, indicating that Openness was the only trait to significantly influence intervention responsiveness.

These findings indicate that while self affirmation increased both Hope and Optimism, only Openness to Experience moderated the effect of the intervention on Optimism. This suggests that Openness to experiences may play a role in amplifying the benefits of Self-Affirmation intervention.

#### 4. DISCUSSION

The present study examined whether personality traits within the OCEAN model moderate the effects of self affirmation intervention on Hope and Optimism among undergraduate students. Consistent with prior research, a previous study by the authors found that Self Affirmation significantly increases Hope and Optimism among undergraduates.

The results of current study revealed that the relationship between Self-Affirmation and Hope was not moderated by OCEAN personality traits. Although Conscientiousness ( $p = .053$ ) and Extraversion ( $p = .069$ ) showed marginal trends, these effects were statistically not significant. These findings align with previous researches that showed that relationship between personality traits and Hope is inconsistent across traits, with some traits showing weak or no association with Hope (Das, Arora, & Singh, 2019; Mishra & Dutta, 2019). It is notable that Hope has been taken from the Psychological Capital framework in this study wherein it is defined as state like developable psychological resource rather than a fixed trait. Empirical studies examining how personality moderates Hope within Psychological Capital framework are scarce, which shows a gap in knowledge and a lack of prior studies to predict such interactions.

In contrast, Openness to experience significantly moderated the effects of Self-Affirmation on Optimism, indicating that the intervention was more effective for individuals higher in Openness. This pattern echoes previous literature wherein a positive association was found between Openness to experience and Optimism (Nishaat, 2024; Lounsbury et al., 2004). However, the association was found between dispositional Optimism and not for Optimism in the Psychological Capital framework highlighting yet another gap in literature. Other personality traits such as Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness and neuroticism did not moderate the effect of self affirmation on Optimism. Overall, the findings suggest that Hope responded to self affirmation uniformly, unaffected by personality traits but Optimism was more sensitive to individual differences in Openness to experience.

There were several limitations associated with the study, the sample was collected only from one geographical location i.e. Jaipur which limits the generalizability of findings. The use of self report measures may make the responses of the participants susceptible to social desirability. The intervention was brief and the outcomes were assessed in a short time span therefore its effects in the long term are unclear.

Future research can focus on examining additional moderators, incorporating longer multiple sessions for self-affirmation, diverse populations and explore mechanism pathways for the relationship between self affirmation intervention and components of psychological capital.

#### 5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion the present study showed that while Self-Affirmation improves both Hope and Optimism, OCEAN personality traits do not moderate the changes in Hope. On the contrary, Openness to experience significantly moderates the changes in Optimism, indicating that individuals higher in Openness may benefit more from self -affirmation. These findings highlight that considering personality while planning self affirmation intervention may enhance the effects of Self-Affirmation intervention..

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