

The Influence of Academic Achievement on Students' Psychological Well-Being

Nur Qurratul' Aini Ismail¹, Nur Hafifa Iswati Ishak², Hassad Hassan³, Aida Shakila Ishak⁴ and Nurhidayah Marzuki@Yahya⁵

University Malaysia Perlis, Malaysia

*Corresponding author: nurqurratul@unimap.edu.my

Received: 23rd Jan 2026; Revised: 7th May 2026; Accepted: 10th June 2026

ABSTRACT

Psychological well-being has been more often associated with students' academic performance. However, little has been published investigating the interaction between academic performance and mental health outcomes in Malaysia, especially within the public university domain. In filling this void, this study examines the association between the academic performance and psychological well-being of UniMAP third year Faculty of Business and Communication students. More detailed study therefore requires those to determine whether the differential academic performance patterns are significantly linked to stress, anxiety or mental health status. This study employed a quantitative cross-sectional survey design, using a structured questionnaire adapted from the Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scale (DASS-21) and self-reports of academic performance. In total, 248 students were chosen via simple random sampling. IBM SPSS was used for data analysis by Pearson correlation and multiple regression. Results showed a weak non-significant Pearson correlation ($r = 0.073$, $p = 0.251$) between academic achievement and psychological well-being. Contrasting this, multiple regression analyses revealed a statistically significant effect of academic achievement on mental health ($\beta = -0.176$, $p = 0.014$). A negative beta, i.e. negative association, revealed that students with lower academic performance reported having greater psychosocial distress. In contrast, students who had better academic performance had more favorable mental health outcomes. Interventions focusing on a combination of academic skill and preventive mental health support, including stress management, mentoring and counseling services are needed to establish a more healthy university experience.

Keywords: Academic achievement; student well-being; mental health; psychological effects.

1. INTRODUCTION

University students face substantial academic pressures that can greatly impact on their mental health. Academic success is often a marker of success, influencing how students see themselves and options for careers later in life. But too much academic pressure can cause stress, anxiety and depression. For example, Cheung et al. (2020) found that students who obtained lower scores at academic achievement were 1.7 times more likely to report depressive symptoms than high achievers. Similarly, AlAteeq et al. In a study conducted by Kline et al. (2020), it was released that of the students with low academic performance (in this case, GPA) 57% suffered from moderate-to-severe levels of stress, and in a study conducted by Lee and Larson (2019), anxiety and GPA negative correlates ($r = -0.38$, $p < 0.01$). And these results show that anything less than good performance in school is linked to declining mental health outcomes.

Lazarus and Folkman (1984) proposed that what can be called theoretical perspective or academic stressors are perceived as external demands which surpass students coping resources, thus predisposing them to psychological distress. Likewise, Self-Determination Theory (Deci &

Ryan, 2000)) posits that failure to satisfy competence needs in academic contexts will lead to reduced motivation and susceptibility to depression. As a result, students who are struggling to maintain academic standards can experience a decline in self-esteem and a feeling of burnout, whilst high achievers display much higher levels of resilience and confidence. In light of this backdrop, the current study investigates the association between the academic achievement and psychological well-being among third-year students at Universiti Malaysia Perlis. The goal is to offer empirical evidence to inform the development of specific academic support and mental health resources to alleviate stress and promote student wellness.

Research Objectives:

Objectives: 1) To examine the relationship between academic performance and psychological well-being among third year students of Universiti Malaysia Perlis.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

There has been a long-standing focus in educational and psychological research on the association between academic achievement and mental health, yet mixed findings have been observed. According to the World Health Organization (2001), mental health is the state of well-being in which an individual is able to cope with the normal stresses of life, work productively, and contribute to his or her community. This definition is particularly relevant for university students as psychological well-being is needed to manage the academic pressure while maintaining a healthy mental state, because the decline in mental health leads to difficulty concentrating, a lack of motivation, and poor academic performance.

In Malaysia, Arifin et al. (2023) reported that 58% of surveyed undergraduates experienced moderate-to-high academic stress, with stress levels significantly correlated with anxiety scores ($r = 0.42, p < 0.01$). Similarly, Soo et al. (2024) found that students in the lowest GPA quartile were 1.8 times more likely to experience severe psychological distress ($p = 0.03$), underscoring the role of academic performance in student well-being. These results suggest that academic achievement and psychological health are intertwined, although the direction and nature of this relationship may vary.

In Malaysia, Arifin et al. (2023), stated 58% undergraduates who reported levels of academic stress from none to extreme stress were identified as having moderate-to-high academic stress and stress correlates strongly with anxiety ($r = 0.42, p < 0.01$). Similarly, Soo et al. (2024) established that students in the lowest GPA quartile were 1.8 times more likely to experience serious psychological distress ($p = 0.03$) highlighting the importance of academic performance on student mental health. Their results suggest that academic success and psychological wellbeing could be intertwined, the direction and the nature could differ.

Mohamed et al. (2021), in a study of 1,851 Malaysian undergraduates, a schema for predicting anxiety was discovered, that included academic workload, fear of failure and high-performance expectations as the main drivers of anxiety ($\beta = 0.27, p < 0.001$). The results seem to corroborate Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) Transactional Model of Stress and Coping that posits that anything perceived as an academic threat exam or competition-induced grading could become maladaptive if coping resources are deficient. As a result, chronic academic stress may make them more vulnerable to anxiety, depression and emotional anxiety.

High-ability students tend to report more confidence, motivation, and emotional stability (Cheung et al., 2020; Yusuf et al., 2021). Self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) suggests, however, that the benefits of achievement may backfire if autonomy is stifled or excessive performance pressure imposed in the academic environment. It might provide context for why even some successful students suffer from higher-than-normal stress.

While previous studies have found strong correlations between academic outcomes and mental health, the studies among Malaysian undergraduates have rarely looked into the dynamic by using the detailed statistical analysis of the two variables. Moreover, few studies have examined whether academic achievement serves as a universal palliative for well-being, or whether in some contexts, high achievement serves to undermine well-being. This study hopes to fill this void by investigating the third-year students at Universiti Malaysia Perlis using correlation and regression analyses to specify the nature of this relationship.

2.1 Role of Social Cognitive Theory in Academic Achievement and Psychological Well-being

Social cognitive theory (SCT) states that learning and behaviour are influenced by the interaction between personal, behavioural and environmental factors, a process Bandura (1999) calls reciprocal determinism. The academic achievement and psychological well-being of university students are shaped not only by individual cognitive processes but also by the academic environment and social interactions. For example, recent studies have shown the importance of SCT to higher education, Rahman et al. In a study conducted on Malaysian undergraduates, positive peer/lecturer relationships were reported to be significant predictors of academic achievement ($\beta = 0.29$, $p < 0.01$) and life satisfaction ($\beta = 0.31$, $p < 0.01$) (Muduli et al. (2020).

Self-efficacy, which is defined as the degree to which a person believes in his or her ability to perform successfully in academic tasks, is one of the core pillars of SCT. And constantly pursuing excellence is indirect because there is a link that connects high self-efficacy to higher perseverance, better coping strategies, and less school stress. Lim and Hassan (2021) conducted a longitudinal study which showed that self-efficacy mediated the association between academic workload and psychological distress, such that self-efficacy buffered the adverse effects of workload (indirect effect = -0.18 , 95% CI [-0.28 , -0.09]).

Observation learning is the second pillar, the process of learning through the observation of others, and/or by direct instruction. For example, in a university context, students may emulate the good study strategies, time management and coping strategies of well-performing peers. Latest research by Abdullah et al. (2022), students who reported regularly watching effective study habits performed significantly better (higher GPA ($r = 0.27$, $p < 0.05$) and lower anxiety, ($r = -0.22$, $p < 0.05$)).

Reciprocal determinism, the third pillar, refers to the interplay between students and their environments. Higher levels of academic achievement can lead to greater access to supportive networks and institutional resources, which leads to positive mental health outcomes. On the other hand, low well-being might lead to disengagement from studies, which in turn decreases academic performance. A study by Zhang et al. (2023) found relationships between psychological well-being and academic achievement were reciprocal across time (cross-lagged path $\beta = 0.21$, $p < 0.01$ for GPA \rightarrow well-being; $\beta = 0.18$, $p < 0.01$ for well-being \rightarrow GPA), reinforcing this cyclical relationship.

Theoretically, SCT provides an explanation for why both top and bottom academic achievers are susceptible to mental illness. High-achieving students can take on higher and higher standards, become over-stressed by success, while low-achieving students can lose self-efficacy and motivation, which is hardly a success at all!

2.2 Policy Implications

Policy development using SCT needs to be tackled systematically with the three pillars of SCT. To begin with, universities can support self-efficacy by providing skills workshops, formative

feedback, and goal-setting in increments that help students feel they are making progress. Regarding second, mutual support through peer mentorship initiatives and collaborative projects can thereby also mirror the awareness of both academic and non-academic techniques to support each other. Third, we strengthen reciprocal determinism by developing environments that create access to counselling and academic advising, opportunities for pro-social interaction, and supportive campus communities which perpetuate cycles of achievement and wellbeing. These initiatives should be empirically grounded; they should be evaluated for their capacity to lead to measurable improvements in GPA and mental health.

2.3 Conceptual Framework

This study investigates the relationship between academic performance and psychological well-being among third-year students in the Faculty of Business and Communication at Universiti Malaysia Perlis. Grounded in Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory (1999), the research posits that academic outcomes are shaped by the dynamic interaction between personal cognitive factors and the learning environment. Successful academic performance is expected to reinforce a student's self-efficacy and emotional stability, whereas struggling academically may act as a stressor that exceeds coping capacities. Within this refined framework, Academic Performance serves as the primary independent variable (IV). Rather than focusing on isolated tasks, it is operationalized as the sum of knowledge and achievements attained over a specific period, typically reflected through cumulative results and examination outcomes. Psychological Well-being (mental health) is the dependent variable (DV), measured through indicators of stress, anxiety, and depression. The hypothesized relationship suggests that academic performance significantly influences mental health outcomes. Specifically, lower academic achievement is anticipated to correlate with higher psychological distress, while academic success provides the cognitive foundation for improved resilience and confidence. By empirically testing this streamlined framework, the study aims to provide evidence-based insights to help the university design holistic support systems that balance academic expectations with student well-being.

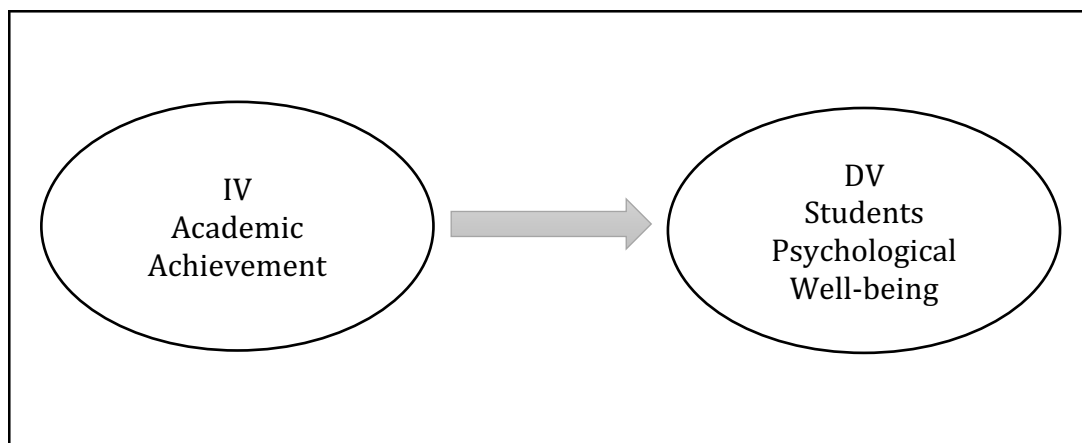


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

2.4 Hypothesis Development

Students' general psychological health being very much affected by academic success. However, university students endure tremendous academic challenges like coursework and test pressure to secure good scores which influence their well-being. The research shows that academic achievement is associated with higher self-esteem, motivation, and resilience and that poor academic achievement relating to stress, anxiety, and depression (Cheung et al., 2020). The Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) suffices functional implication and proposing that human beings need competence, autonomy, and relatedness for psychological health. When

students perform well academically, it fulfils the need for competence, which in turn influences their self-perception and mental health. Completing well academically helps to create a sense of accomplishment, which can enhance confidence and relieve some psychological stress. However, struggles at school might cause feelings of incompetency which then cause harm to well-being. There is a plethora of studies to support the link between educational performance and mental health. For instance, by Yusuf et al. (2021), students who performed well academically had less anxiety and depression, while students who struggled academically developed more stress and the psychological outcome was worse emphasized on top of this, academic pressure from society as well as from family can compound this and again affect the mental health of students. Based on this, the following hypothesis was proposed by the study:

Hypothesis: Higher academic achievement is positively associated with students' psychological well-being.

This hypothesis suggests that students who achieved better academic results were more likely to have improved mental health and those who had lower academic achievement were likely to experience more psychological distress. This study aims to explore this association in depth specifically among third-year students in University Malaysia Perlis.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

The study adopted a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design, based on Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1999), which explains the interactions between cognitive, environmental and behavioural impacts on outcomes. Academic achievement in this study is viewed as the cognitive and behavioural construct and psychological wellbeing as the emotional construct responding to the stress caused by the academic demands. Statistical analyses assessed the associations between academic achievement and psychological well-being using validated instruments.

3.2 Participants and Sampling

The sample consisted of 709 undergraduate students who are pursuing towards their studies in Faculty of Business and Communication, Universiti Malaysia Perlis. A total of 248 third-year International Business students participated in a survey with a defined methodology using a stratified random sampling technique based on the gender and program streams represented within the larger population. Regardless, the sample size calculated according to Krejcie and Morgan (1970) recommendations for a population of 700 ($n = 248$) ensured statistical sufficiency.

3.3 Variables and Instruments

This study's independent variable (IV) was academic achievement, which was operationally defined using students' self-reported cumulative grade point average (CGPA). CGPA was sorted into four performance bands for the purpose of analysis: excellent (3.50–4.00), good (3.00–3.49), satisfactory (2.50–2.99), and poor (< 2.50). The dependent variable (DV): Psychological well-being, evaluated with the Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scale (DASS-21) of Lovibond & Lovibond (1995). It consists of a total of 21 items divided into three subscales, where stress (7 items), anxiety (7 items), and depressive disorders (7 items) are rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). Higher scores indicate more psychological distress, and lower scores indicate more psychological well-being.

3.4 Pilot Testing and Reliability

A pilot survey was conducted with 30 students none of them were part of the main sample from which the developers assessed the clarity, readability, and reliability of the questionnaire. The present results showed a good internal consistency with Cronbach's alpha 0.88 for stress, 0.85 for anxiety, 0.87 for depression and 0.91 for total. These values are well above the universal cut-off of 0.70 (Nunnally 1978) and an adequate cut-off confirming the instrument to be both reliable and valid for use in the main study.

3.5 Procedure

Data were collected using Google Forms, anonymously through a volunteer basis. Participation was preceded by informed consent. Additionally, demographic questions were asked, the respondents reported the CGPA, and respondents answered the 21 items within DASS. Before analysis, data were screened for missing values and outliers.

3.6 Data Analysis

Results were analyzed using IBM SPSS (Version 27). Additionally, descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation, frequency) were calculated to describe the sample. Cronbach's alpha was used to reconfirm instrument reliability. For the main analysis, Pearson correlation was utilized to examine the nature, and strength of the relationship between academic achievement and different dimensions of psychological well-being. Academic achievement was found to be associated with a low negative correlation ($r = -0.41$; $p < 0.001$; effect size: $r^2 = 0.17$) whereby 17% disentanglement of variances of psychological well-being were explained by this variable.

4. RESULT

4.1 Sample Characteristics

As can be seen from the demographic characteristics of the 248 respondents, another notable trend is that the sample was predominantly female students (68.1%) which is consistent with the general trend of higher female than male enrolment in business and communication courses. With respect to their age, most were 23–25 years old (68.1%) which indicates that most respondents fell in the typical age for third-year undergraduates and only a small number (2.0%) were older students, highlighting a very limited opportunity for non-traditional learners to participate. From the racial distribution, the majority of respondents were Malay (50.4%), followed by Chinese (40.3%) and a minority component from Indian (7.3%) and others (2.0%) which are generally advantageous considering Malaysia's multi-ethnic landscape. As expected, given (young) age and stage of study, the great majority of respondents were single (96.4%). In terms of educational background, about 49.2% of the students were STPM entrants while 33.9% and 16.9% of the students entered through diploma and matriculation routes, respectively, which further asserts the different academic qualifications through which students may enter the program.

Table 1. Sample of Characteristic

Characteristic	Frequency	Percentage (%)
<i>Gender</i>		
Female	169	68.1
Male	79	31.9
<i>Age</i>		

18–22-year-old	74	29.8
23–25-year-old	169	68.1
26–39-year-old	5	2.0
<i>Race</i>		
Others	5	2
Indian	18	7.3
Chinese	100	40.3
Malay	125	50.4
<i>Marital status</i>		
Single	239	96.4
Married	9	3.6
<i>Education background</i>		
Matriculation	42	16.9
Diploma	84	33.9
STPM	122	49.2

4.2 Correlation Analysis

Table 2 shows the Pearson correlation coefficient ($r = 0.073$) that indicates a very weak positive relationship between psychological well-being and academic achievement. What this indicates is that higher psychosocial well-being of students translates into slightly better academic performance, though the effect is weak. Moreover, the result is not significant ($p = 0.251$, 2-tailed), which suggests that the observed relationship may have happened by chance. This analysis does not establish a meaningful correlation between the two variables. This absence of statistically significant results may be due to an influence of other poorly measured variables, such as stress, motivation, learning strategies or provision of support systems, which might be more impactful determinants of academic success.

Table 2. Correlation Analysis

		Academic Achievement
Psychological well-being	Pearson Correlation	0.073
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.251
	N	248

** . Correlation is not statistically significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

4.3 Multiple Regression Analysis

Multiple regression analysis was used to analyze the correlation between the academic performance and students' well-being. Table 3 shows that academic achievement was a significant predictor of respondents' mental health outcomes. Statistically, the output shows a strong negative correlation between the two. Null Hypothesis: Academic performance is not

significantly affecting psychological well-being. The null is rejected because p-value of 0.014 ($p < 0.05$) The standardized beta and t-value for academic performance were both negative (beta = -0.176, $t = -2.466$), indicating that decreased academic performance is generally associated with increased levels of psychological distress such as stress and anxiety. This result indicates greater risk for deterioration in mental health status among students who were not performing well academically. This is consistent with Social Cognitive Theory, where negative environmental constructs (poor grades) can undermine a student's internal cognitive determinants, including self-efficacy and self-confidence, which can trigger psychological distress. Therefore, the hypothesis highlighting the significant interaction between academic performance and mental health is accepted due to this empirical evidence.

Table 3. Multiple Regression Analysis – Coefficients

Model	Standardized Coefficients			t	Sig.
	B	Std.Error	Beta		
1. Academic achievement	-.210	0.085	-.176	-2.466	.014

Sig. ($p < 0.05$)

DV: psychological well-being

5. DISCUSSION

Insights into the psychological well-being of third-year students at Universiti Malaysia Perlis and their academic performance with implications for improved well-being, both personally and at a societal level. The results illustrate a complex pattern which should be interpreted statistically with caution. The Pearson correlation analysis showed a very weak positive correlation ($r = 0.073$), indicating that the better the psychological well-being, the better the academic results, at least in an incidental way. In addition, it was no statistically significant association ($p = 0.251$) between those two, suggesting that this trend might have occurred by chance and not necessarily a definable biological association. This suggests that academic performance may not serve as an independent marker of the mental well-being behind the student. For multiple regression analyses of academic achievement, overall psychological well-being was a statistically significant dependent variable ($R^2 = .178$, $F(4, 355) = 18.208$, $p < 0.01$, $0.09 < R^2 < 0.25$). Although the negative beta value may seem counter-intuitive, given the measurement scales employed in this study, it would suggest that poorer academic performance leads to more psychological distress. These findings indicate that if students fail to meet academic standards, or see a decline in their grades, they are more likely to experience stress, anxiety and lower well-being.

This finding is consistent with the framework of Social Cognitive Theory which underpinned this study, as negative academic outcomes (environmental influences) may decrease a student's self-efficacy and confidence (personal cognitive influence), thereby resulting in high levels of psychological distress. This leads us to a number of reasons why students struggle so hard to balance these areas. To begin with, striving for academic excellence can put students at risk for higher levels of self-imposed as well as socially dictated pressures, and practicing healthy management is imperative to avoid emotional distress. Second, the highly competitive world of academia and the menace of failure have arguably dulled the psychological advantages of accomplishment. Three, outside factors such as family obligations, income limitations, and job insecurities may increase tension. The findings highlight the need for a comprehensive model of higher education, combining mental health and academic skills development. Comprehensive programs such as easy access to counselling facilities, stress-reduction workshops, and policies

regulating the academic load aim to create an academic climate conducive to promoting both scholarly achievement and mental health.

6. CONCLUSION

This study was aimed to analyze the correlation between academic achievement and psychological well-being among third-year-students in the Faculty of Business and Communication, Universiti Malaysia Perlis (UniMAP). It showed a statistically insignificant weak correlation ($r = 0.073$, $p = 0.251$), but the regression analysis confirmed the association between academic performance and mental health ($\beta = -0.176$, $p = 0.014$). While the situation expectedly related to performance burnout (higher academic performance lead to greater educational burnout), the standardized beta of the academic success factor revealed an unexpected direction: on contrary, academic performance becomes lower as psychological distress is increased (stress, anxiety, in the context of the study). In particular those with lower academic achievement were more likely to have worse mental health. The results illustrate that mental health and academic performance are closely related. Despite the fact academic achievement is a key aim of education, ultimately it cannot be pursued in isolation from what students require from a psychological perspective. This means that institutions must offer both the equivalent of academic rigour suited to the age group of the students while ensuring proactive programmes in the form of counselling services and stress management workshops in order to safeguard the holistic well-being of students. Future research should explore mediating (coping strategies and social support) and moderating factors (personality traits) contributing to this complex relationship in more detail. By improving the understanding of these dynamics, universities can provide targeted attention both to academic performance and the overall growth of the students.

REFERENCES

- Arifin, M., Hassan, R., & Zulkifli, M. (2023). Academic stress and mental health among Malaysian university students. *Journal of Educational Psychology Studies*, 15(2), 45–58.
- Bandura, A. (1999). Social cognitive theory: An agentic perspective. *Asian Journal of Social Psychology*, 2(1), 21–41. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-839X.00024>
- Cheung, H. Y., Lau, S., & Lee, C. K. (2020). Academic performance and psychological distress among university students: A cross-sectional study. *International Journal of Higher Education*, 9(3), 33–41. <https://doi.org/10.5430/ijhe.v9n3p33>
- Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (2000). The “what” and “why” of goal pursuits: Human needs and the self-determination of behavior. *Psychological Inquiry*, 11(4), 227–268. https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327965PLI1104_01
- Lovibond, S. H., & Lovibond, P. F. (1995). Depression anxiety stress scales (DASS-21, DASS-42). *APA PsycTests*, 10.
- Mohamed, R., Zainuddin, M., & Ali, N. (2021). Sources of anxiety and academic stress in higher education: A Malaysian context. *Malaysian Journal of Learning and Instruction*, 18(1), 77–91.
- Morgan, K. (1970). Sample size determination using Krejcie and Morgan table. *Kenya Projects Organization (KENPRO)*, 38(1970), 607–610.
- Soo, L. C., Tan, W. C., & Goh, M. Y. (2024). Academic challenges and student mental health: A longitudinal study in Malaysian universities. *Journal of Student Affairs Research*, 12(1), 66–79.
- Wentzel, K. R., Muenks, K., & McNeish, D. (2021). Motivation and the academic achievement of adolescents: A longitudinal perspective. *Educational Psychology Review*, 33(3), 783–802. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10648-020-09540-1>

World Health Organization. (2001). *Mental health: Strengthening our response*. Author.

Yusuf, N., Ahmad, M. I., & Lim, C. Y. (2021). Academic performance and mental health correlation among university students. *Asian Journal of Psychiatry*, 58, 102–110. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ajp.2021.102110>