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CULTIVATING POSITIVE EMOTIONS FOR SOCIOEMOTIONAL REINTEGRATION AMONG FIRST- YEAR UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN PERU

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ABSTRACT

*The article evaluates the effectiveness of a positive emotions program to improve social skills, as a post-pandemic recovery process, applied to university-entering students. A quantitative methodology was used, with a pre-experimental pretest-posttest design with a single group. The BarOn Emotional Quotient Inventory (EQ-i), adapted and validated for the Peruvian population ($\alpha=0.93$), was used, evaluating the dimensions of assertiveness, empathy, interpersonal relationships, and social responsibility. Results: The study included 139 incoming students in education programs (71.2% women, 28.8% men), aged between 16 and 29 years. The Student's *t*-test revealed statistically significant differences ($p<0.05$) in all dimensions evaluated, with considerable effect sizes for empathy ($d=1.771$), interpersonal relationships ($d=1.555$), and social responsibility ($d=1.133$), while assertiveness showed a smaller effect ($d=0.277$). The program demonstrated significant effectiveness in improving social skills, especially in empathy and interpersonal relationships, suggesting the need for specific interventions for assertiveness.*

KEYWORDS: Affective Development, Social Skills, Higher Education, Emotional Competence.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the post-pandemic context, various studies have shown a negative impact on the mental health and social skills of university students, manifested in high levels of stress, anxiety, loneliness, and deterioration in interpersonal communication (Reyes Matos et al., 2023; Muñoz del Carpio-Toia et al., 2024). Despite the gradual return to in-person learning, many educational institutions continue to struggle with these lingering effects, revealing a gap in comprehensive interventions focused on positive emotions particularly within the Peruvian context.

University-level professional training represents a great challenge; we are experiencing rapid changes at the scientific, technological, and social levels, with the aftereffects of COVID-19 and social problems such as the economic crisis, social violence, and school violence. After more than two years of social isolation, students may have developed new study habits and behaviors; currently, students entering university have habits of frequent social media use and difficulties with social interaction. The university student who is exposed to the free use of social networks, the excessive use of ICT, and as warned by Malo-Cerrato et al. (2018), may develop problematic behaviors, psychological anxiety, react impulsively, and have socialization problems.

In an evolving professional landscape, the emphasis on certifications and high-level cognitive skills is rapidly shifting toward the cultivation of soft skills such as communication, adaptability, and critical thinking that foster workplace effectiveness and professional success. A theoretical analysis of job postings across 19,000 organizations operating in Industry 5.0 contexts revealed a marked increase in demand for soft skills, including flexibility, collaboration, and interpersonal communication (Poláková, 2023). Similarly, structured soft skills training has been shown to significantly enhance employee performance, teamwork, leadership, and adaptability (Kethankar, 2024). These findings support the inclusion of personal and social skills as central elements of contemporary professional training.

The World Health Organization (2022) reported an accelerated increase in mental health problems; among them, anxiety, stress, and depression. Within its post-pandemic policies, it plans to implement mental health recovery actions as one of the priority aspects, calling on professionals and institutions committed to educational tasks to incorporate this need into their plans and programs.

Following the COVID-19 pandemic, as the United Nations (2021) warns, the consequences will not only

affect public health, the economy, and social development for decades, but a new hidden pandemic will emerge that will affect an entire generation mental health. Many students worldwide had to rapidly switch from in-person to remote learning, which reduced opportunities for free time and social interaction for over a year and a half, affecting their physical and socio-emotional development fundamental aspects for a comprehensive and healthy education. Likewise, through the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 3 Health and well-being, and goal 4, Quality education, the intention is to promote quality education, with comprehensive health, both physical and mental, for the entire population, in order to achieve well-being and sustainable development.

The United Nations Children's Fund - UNICEF (2022) considers mental health to be fundamental to the comprehensive health and well-being of individuals, and it is also an influential factor in the academic and social aspects of students. Therefore, it suggests that educational institutions must respond to this demand by promoting socio-emotional well-being for their students and teachers.

Peruvian society is currently experiencing a severe crisis of social violence that is affecting the mental health of the population. According to the National Education Council (2020), the National Educational Project to 2036, in its third purpose, aims to promote socio-emotional well-being and commits educational institutions to this objective.

The Ministry of Education of Peru (2021) proposes promoting the comprehensive health of students physical and mental as well as the development of socio-emotional skills, through tutoring and educational guidance services in the multiple interactions that occur in the classroom, school, family, and community, involving all educational agents of the institutions.

Bromley (2024) reports, based on figures from the Mental Health Directorate of the Ministry of Health (Minsa) of Peru, that so far this year the ministry has served 1,128,553 people. Of the total, 54.32% corresponds to children, 17.53% to adolescents, and 14.64% to young people, with the most frequently treated pathologies being anxiety disorders, depression, and emotional and behavioral disorders. He emphasizes educational action through emotional education as a tool to care for mental health.

Upon entering university, students must adapt to a new social group, collaborative methodologies, and cooperative work; at the same time, they must develop skills for autonomous learning, active

participation in debates, discussions, and presentations. According to Guerra (2019) and Claros *et al.* (2023), the use of social skills is essential for the success of these academic processes, as the student must interact, communicate their points of view, contribute ideas, propose solutions to problematic situations, and explain their own reasoning.

Universities have taken on the challenge of guaranteeing educational quality and are implementing new pedagogical approaches, active methodologies, and the development of cognitive, personal, and social skills, in order to ensure comprehensive training at the university level. Vocational training requires students with critical thinking skills (Zambrano *et al.*, 2024), leadership competencies, a positive and proactive attitude (Ministry of Education of Peru, 2021; Navas *et al.*, 2023), as well as social skills that promote teamwork (Claros *et al.*, 2023). According to the National Educational Project for 2036 (Ministry of Education of Peru, 2021), Strategy 2 states that teachers must address the needs of students and their social environment, promoting proactive leadership aimed at social transformation and the strengthening of positive emotional bonds.

Universities must address the educational challenges posed by national and international organizations in order to guarantee academic quality and the comprehensive development of students. Likewise, they must respond to the call to implement recovery programs aimed at mitigating the aftereffects of COVID-19.

The aim of this research was to determine the influence of the application of a positive emotions program on the development of social skills such as assertiveness, empathy, interpersonal relationships, and social responsibility in students beginning their university studies, as part of a process of recovering capabilities post-pandemic.

From an empirical-analytical epistemological perspective, this research assumes that social skills, as observable and measurable behaviors, can be objectively evaluated through validated psychometric instruments. The use of a quasi-experimental pretest-posttest design is consistent with this approach, as it seeks to determine the causal influence of a structured educational intervention on the development of socio-emotional competencies. Furthermore, the study is framed within a socio-educational paradigm that recognizes the school and university settings as key spaces for promoting mental health and psychosocial well-being through pedagogical strategies (UNICEF, 2022; Ministry of Education of Peru, 2021).

1.1. Context and Relevance of the Study

The social isolation of more than two years during the COVID-19 pandemic represented a frustrating period for many children and adolescents accustomed to social interaction. Several studies have indicated that the pandemic affected, to some extent, the mental health of children and delayed the development of their social skills.

The Peruvian education system including educational institutions, teachers, students, and parents was not prepared for non-face-to-face education. Homes became the new educational spaces, but family members did not have the necessary conditions or skills to foster a positive coexistence that would allow for adequate education during isolation.

Classes were held virtually, and students spent long periods in front of their computers, tablets, or cell phones, which became their only means of communication with classmates and friends. According to Malo-Cerrato *et al.* (2018), the excessive and prolonged use of these devices generates socialization problems.

Various international and national organizations (World Health Organization (2020); United Nations (2021); United Nations Children's Fund-UNICEF (2022); Ministry of Education of Peru (2021); Ministry of Health of Peru (2024), National Education Council of Peru (2020), propose, as post-COVID-19 pandemic alternatives, the implementation of recovery programs to promote the mental health and socio-emotional well-being of students, considering them to be influential factors in academic development and good social relationships.

Several studies demonstrate that soft and social skills can be developed through psychoeducational programs, workshops, and training programs (Bandura (2002); United Nations Children's Fund-UNICEF (2022); Guerra-Báez (2019); Huyhua-Gutierrez *et al.* (2024)). Recent interventions have explored the development of social skills through structured programs in post-pandemic contexts. For example, Mulyana *et al.* (2024) implemented a jigsaw-based learning model in a taekwondo course and observed improvements in students' emotional well-being and peer interaction. Similarly, Carnicero *et al.* (2023) applied role-playing techniques with intellectually disabled youth, finding gains in social assertiveness. However, these studies differ from the present work in their target populations and contextual limitations, as none focus on first-year university students in Latin America a population uniquely affected by prolonged isolation and educational disruption.

Despite emerging literature on emotional education and social skills post-COVID-19, few studies in Peru have systematically evaluated the impact of psychoeducational interventions underpinned by positive emotions and humanistic psychology. While Caicedo (2023) and Huyhua-Gutierrez et al. (2024) offer valuable insights, their analyses remain limited in methodological rigor or target non-university samples. **This study thus contributes by addressing a critical gap** assessing the measurable effects of a structured emotional intervention on social competencies in early university transitions.

A critical review of the available literature also reveals a tendency to conceptualize social skills in abstract or normative terms, without linking them to measurable educational outcomes or contextual variables such as cultural norms or digital overload. Our study builds upon this foundation by operationalizing social competencies using a validated instrument and applying it in a real academic setting, aiming to bridge the gap between theory and actionable intervention.

The process of adapting to university life requires students to master basic social skills that allow them to interact, integrate with new classmates, work in teams, and understand the different ways of being and acting of others. Therefore, universities should implement leveling or recovery programs for these skills.

This study is grounded in several theoretical frameworks that explain the development and role of social skills in educational contexts. First, Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory (2002) emphasizes that individuals learn social behaviors through observation, imitation, and modeling, especially in new and interactive environments such as university. Second, contemporary research on emotional intelligence underscores the importance of recognizing, understanding, and managing emotions for effective interpersonal functioning. For instance, MacCann et al. (2020) demonstrate that emotional intelligence significantly predicts academic achievement and adaptive behavior across educational contexts. Similarly, Fernández-Berrocal et al. (2022) emphasize that emotional competencies such as emotional awareness and regulation can be intentionally developed through structured educational interventions, contributing to improved academic and social outcomes. These theoretical foundations justify the need for structured programs to support students' adaptation through the reinforcement of key socioemotional competencies.

In response to the needs that arose in the post-

COVID-19 pandemic context, this study aimed to promote the development of social skills through a positive emotions program aimed at students beginning their university education.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. Social skills

Human beings are social by nature and live in constant interaction with others. In this context, conflict resolution is one of the fundamental objectives upon which the proper development of social skills is based (García-Grau et al., 2019).

The type and quality of interactions that students establish will largely depend on the level of development of their social skills. These can facilitate adaptation and teamwork, or, on the contrary, generate conflicts that hinder collective work, an essential aspect of university life.

Upon entering the university environment, **students must employ their social skills throughout the adaptation process** from integrating with new classmates and interacting with teachers of diverse styles, to adopting new methodologies focused on teamwork and cooperative learning. The effective use of these skills will be key to their academic success.

Although social skills are often presented as learnable abilities, recent literature debates the extent to which they can be modified through short-term educational programs. Some authors argue that components like assertiveness or empathy are partially conditioned by personality traits and cultural norms (García-Grau et al., 2019), which could limit the generalizability of intervention outcomes. This raises the question of whether psychoeducational programs can produce sustained change or simply short-term adjustments in behavior.

The structure of the program is aligned with Mayer and Salovey's (2007) four-branch model of emotional intelligence, which includes perceiving emotions, facilitating thought through emotions, understanding emotional meanings, and managing emotions. This model supports the integration of emotional awareness with social competence development, enhancing both intra- and interpersonal functioning.

Social skills, encompassing assertiveness, empathy, interpersonal relationships, and social responsibility, are essential for adapting to collaborative academic environments. These abilities are closely linked to emotional intelligence (EI), which facilitates understanding one's own emotions and those of others, enabling effective interpersonal

functioning. Contemporary meta-analytic evidence demonstrates that emotional intelligence particularly the ability-based model predicts academic performance with moderate but significant effect sizes across diverse educational levels (MacCann et al., 2020). This highlights the importance of cultivating EI not only for emotional regulation but also for academic integration.

The four dimensions analyzed in this study assertiveness, empathy, interpersonal relationships, and social responsibility are interdependent. Empathy, for example, strengthens interpersonal relationships by enabling students to perceive and regulate emotional climates within group settings. Likewise, the development of social responsibility is often a consequence of a well-established empathic capacity and assertive communication skills, which allow students to act ethically in collaborative contexts (Caicedo, 2023; Claros et al., 2023).

The study considered the main social skills for university work Assertiveness, empathy, interpersonal relationships, and social responsibility.

Assertiveness: It is the ability that allows for favorable communication in interpersonal relationships; it allows one to express their ideas, thoughts, feelings, and needs clearly, directly, and respectfully, without aggression or conflict, defending their rights or points of view while also respecting the opinions and ideas of others. Assertiveness allows for positive interpersonal relationships in the classroom, fostering teamwork, good communication, and a favorable emotional and motivating climate in the team and classroom, which ensures active participation and favorable academic results. According to Huyhua-Gutierrez et al. (2024), assertiveness can be improved through an educational program.

Empathy: It is the ability to understand the ideas, thoughts, feelings, emotions, affections, and needs of another. It is a complex ability that involves focusing from the other person's perspective in order to understand them and respond in a compassionate way. For Ventura et al. (2021), this process implies an emotional and cognitive awareness. Empathy is another very important social skill for the adaptation process and success in university life. Thanks to this ability, positive and meaningful relationships are forged between classmates, fostering interpersonal relationships, teamwork, and inclusivity. This allows students to understand each other better and establish positive relationships, which reduces the psychological pressure of being accepted into a new group, achieving harmonious coexistence and preventing behaviors that generate emotional

distress. Cuevas (2022) suggests using the empathy map as a strategy to improve social skills and promote positive coexistence.

Interpersonal Relationships: It represents the capacity to establish positive and harmonious connections with others, characterized by respectful, clear, and sincere communication, including eye contact. It involves honoring diverse thoughts, emotions, affections, and behaviors, adapting constructively to others' individuality. These attributes foster favorable personal and communicative relations. Empirical research confirms the academic importance of high-quality interpersonal relationships. Zhang et al. (2021) found that students' connections with peers and teachers significantly enhance school adaptation by influencing perceived school climate, motivation, and emotional well-being. Furthermore, Shengyao (2024) reported that emotional intelligence which facilitates empathy and social attunement is positively associated with academic achievement, mediated by factors such as self-efficacy, resilience, and motivation. In the university context, Cerutti et al. (2024) observed that social-emotional skills including the quality of interpersonal relationships deteriorated after COVID-19 lockdowns among first-year students, underscoring the need to reinforce these skills in transitional educational stages. Together, these findings suggest that nurturing interpersonal relationships through structured socioemotional interventions not only fosters personal well-being but also contributes to academic adjustment and engagement a critical insight for university-level psychoeducational strategies.

Social Responsibility: It is the awareness and commitment to work on the problems of one's social and environmental context; it uses leadership skills and effective communication to promote and motivate teamwork to solve problematic situations. Social responsibility is a key element in university education; therefore, students entering the university context must have developed skills to adapt to this university requirement. According to Vellaey and Álvarez (2019), social responsibility must be sustainable in the social and environmental spheres. To achieve this, a proactive responsibility must be assumed, meaning actively participating and engaging in innovative projects to anticipate problems or carrying out everyday actions to improve social coexistence and harmony with the environment, and not just assuming a passive responsibility where students take actions to avoid causing harm.

2.2. Positive Emotions Program

The positive emotions program is a psychoeducational proposal aimed at promoting the recovery, in the post-pandemic context of COVID-19, of the basic social skills necessary for the adaptation process of students beginning their university education. Its purpose is to support socio-emotional reintegration by leveraging scientifically supported strategies derived from social, humanistic, and positive psychology, as well as from emotional intelligence theory.

This program was implemented through a set of educational actions integrated into the Personal Development course, targeting first-year university students. These actions were carried out at the beginning, during, and end of each session, structured into pedagogical routines that promoted positive emotions. Activities included affectionate greetings, assertive communication, proactive attitude-building, humor, joy, emotional regulation, mindful breathing, relaxation, meditation, yoga, biodanza, and affirmations. Each component was aligned with a particular psychoeducational purpose and was designed to foster a classroom climate of safety, respect, and mutual empathy.

The program aimed to strengthen students' social skills through a multi-theoretical foundation that integrates principles from social psychology, humanistic psychology, positive psychology, and the theory of emotional intelligence. These frameworks provide the conceptual and practical basis for addressing emotional and social development in a structured educational setting.

Recent studies published in high-impact journals have provided solid evidence supporting the effectiveness of positive psychology interventions in higher education settings. Hobbs, Smith, and Williams (2022), through a systematic review in *Frontiers in Psychology*, found that most university-level positive psychology courses significantly enhanced students' well-being and life satisfaction. Similarly, Morgan (2023), in *Frontiers in Education*, demonstrated that the Flourish HE program fostered student engagement, friendship, and emotional adjustment in online learning contexts. Complementing these findings, Wang, Jaafar, and Sulong (2025) emphasized that fostering positive emotions and life satisfaction plays a crucial role in boosting academic engagement. Kiltz, Fokkens Bruinsma, and Jansen (2024) reported that game-based interventions grounded in self-determination theory effectively enhanced resilience and psychological needs satisfaction in university students. Moreover, Tarrats Pons, Farràs, and

Soldevila (2025) showed that structured positive psychology programs significantly reduced depressive symptoms while increasing optimism. Together, these findings strengthen the theoretical and empirical foundations of the Positive Emotions Program applied in this study and align with best practices validated across international educational contexts.

According to Bandura (2002), behavioral and cognitive changes can occur through observation and modeling in social contexts. In the educational setting, students acquire social competencies not only through direct instruction but also by internalizing behaviors modeled by peers and teachers. These interactive and observational processes help develop assertiveness, empathy, and collaboration. As UNICEF (2022) affirms, educational environments that intentionally mediate these interactions create optimal conditions for the acquisition of positive socio-emotional skills.

Based on the humanistic psychology of Rogers and Freiberg (1996), human beings have an innate capacity for growth and development, which flourishes in environments of authenticity, freedom, and empathy. The program promotes emotional safety, self-expression, and unconditional positive regard among participants. This climate allows students to remove social masks and relate more genuinely with others, thereby enhancing personal development and group cohesion.

Seligman's (2017) positive psychology emphasizes well-being, resilience, and the cultivation of personal strengths such as gratitude, optimism, and emotional perseverance. Integrating these principles into educational routines helps students build emotional resources to face academic challenges, maintain positive interpersonal relationships, and foster classroom harmony. Research by Singh (2017) and Soriano (2023) further supports the role of positive emotions in improving mental health, academic performance, and quality of life.

Recent empirical research underscores the importance of emotional clarity, a key component of emotional intelligence, in academic and clinical contexts. Fernández Berrocal et al. (2025) validated the Spanish version of the Trait Meta-Mood Scale (TMMS 24) among Peruvian university students, confirming that emotional clarity is a robust and measurable construct with significant implications for student well-being and academic functioning. Complementarily, López Jr. (2024), in a longitudinal study with adolescents, found that low emotional clarity in the face of life stressors significantly

predicted higher levels of suicidal ideation. These findings provide compelling evidence for the inclusion of emotional clarity in structured socioemotional education programs such as the Positive Emotions Program. By incorporating activities that promote emotional awareness, interpretation, and regulation, the program not only enhances interpersonal skills but also equips students with critical emotional competencies to navigate academic and personal challenges.

These combined theoretical pillars guided the design of the intervention and its implementation in a real classroom context, aiming to enhance **the four social skill dimensions central to this study** assertiveness, empathy, interpersonal relationships, and social responsibility.

Empirical evidence from high-impact studies supports the efficacy of structured positive psychology interventions in higher education contexts. For instance, Lambert et al. (2022) showed that a Positive Psychology Intervention delivered during the pandemic significantly improved university students' well-being and resilience. In Greece, Kounenou et al. (2022) implemented a five-week group intervention that resulted in significant increases in positive emotions and resilience compared to a control group. More recently, Tarrats-Pons et al. (2025) reported that a 15-week positive psychology program effectively reduced depression and enhanced optimism among university students, compared to control conditions. Collectively, these studies, all indexed in Scopus Q1 journals, empirically validate the use of structured emotional education interventions in university settings, reinforcing the rationale of the current Positive Emotions Program.

3. METHODOLOGY

A quantitative study was conducted using a pre-experimental design with a single group and pretest-posttest measurements. The sampling was non-probabilistic and based on convenience, following the methodological guidelines proposed by Hernández-Sampieri and Mendoza (2018). The sample consisted of 139 first-year students enrolled in education programs at the National University of Trujillo, Peru, aged between 16 and 29 years. Of these, 71.2% were women and 28.8% were men.

The composition of the sample predominantly female (71%) should be highlighted as a significant and contextually accurate feature of the study. Indeed, in Latin America and the Caribbean, women's enrollment in tertiary education consistently exceeds 60%, while men's enrollment

remains below 50% (OECD, 2025). Moreover, gender parity in university enrollment has largely been achieved across the region, though women remain underrepresented in higher academic and leadership positions (Correa et al., 2025). Consequently, our study captures authentic gender dynamics within Peruvian faculties of education and reflects real-world demographic trends. This offers a unique opportunity to examine whether positive-emotion-based interventions have differentiated effects by gender thus providing evidence to design more inclusive and context-sensitive programs for student cohorts.

The selection of students from the first academic cycle was based on their transitional stage into university life, a period commonly associated with high levels of emotional vulnerability and the need for socio-emotional adaptation (Domínguez-Lara & Merino-Soto, 2023). Likewise, focusing on future educators is pedagogically strategic, as this population is expected to model and transmit socio-emotional competencies throughout their professional development. This choice aligns with the principles of formative education, which emphasize early intervention for long-term behavioral impact (UNESCO, 2023).

To assess social skills, the study employed the BarOn Emotional Quotient Inventory (EQ-i), adapted and standardized for the Peruvian population by Ugarriza (2001). The adaptation was based on a representative sample of 1,996 individuals from Metropolitan Lima and demonstrated a high internal consistency, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.93 for the overall emotional quotient. The factor structure proposed by BarOn was confirmed through second-order confirmatory factor analysis, offering solid evidence of construct validity. For the purposes of this study, the subtests specifically addressing assertiveness, empathy, interpersonal relationships, and social responsibility were applied, corresponding to the dimensions targeted by the intervention.

The intervention consisted of implementing a positive emotions program over 14 consecutive weeks, integrated into the Personal Development course in the first academic cycle. The program was grounded in theoretical principles from humanistic psychology, positive psychology, and emotional intelligence theory. It incorporated daily pedagogical routines designed to foster socio-emotional well-being, such as warm greetings, assertive communication, a proactive attitude, humor, joy, emotional regulation, mindful breathing, relaxation, meditation, yoga, biodanza, and the use of positive

affirmations.

Data collection was conducted at two points in time before the implementation of the program (pretest) and upon its completion after 14 weeks (posttest). Participation was voluntary and based on signed informed consent, in accordance with ethical standards. The study adhered to institutional ethical guidelines and the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki, ensuring data confidentiality and the participants' right to withdraw at any stage without consequences.

Descriptive statistics were used to characterize the sample and the variables. The Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was applied to the difference between pretest and posttest scores for the overall social skills variable, showing a normal distribution ($p > 0.05$). Additionally, the skewness and kurtosis coefficients of the subdimensions did not exceed the ± 1.5 threshold, confirming normality. Based on this, the Student's t-test for related samples was used to evaluate the statistical significance of the differences between pretest and posttest scores. Cohen's d was

also calculated to determine the effect size, with a benchmark of 0.8 or greater considered large, supporting the interpretation of practical significance.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of the Sample (n=139).

	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Sex	Female	99	71.2
	Male	40	28.8
Age range	Adolescents (16-17 years)	43	30.9
	Young (18-29 years)	96	69.1

In Table 1 shows that 71.2% of the sample were female ($n = 99$), while 28.8% were male ($n = 40$). Regarding age, the majority of participants were young adults aged 18 to 29 years (69.1%), followed by adolescents aged 16 to 17 years (30.9%).

Table 2: Normality and Descriptive Statistics of Social Skills and Their Dimensions (N = 139).

Difference (Posttest-pretest)	Kolmogorov-Smirnov ^a					Asymmetry	Kurtosis
	Statistic	df	Sig.	Mean	SD		
Social skills	0.051	139	0.200*	17.76	8.909	-0.116	-0.266
Assertiveness	0.092	139	0.006	0.81	2.911	0.215	-0.175
Empathy	0.079	139	0.034	6.77	3.823	0.129	-0.175
Interpersonal relationships	0.095	139	0.004	6.17	3.969	-0.131	-0.223
Social Responsibility	0.081	139	0.026	4.01	3.543	-0.071	-0.548

Note: Lilliefors significance correction applied. DE= standard deviation

Table 2 presents the normality and descriptive statistics for the variable social skills and its four dimensions. The Kolmogorov-Smirnov test indicated that the total score (posttest-pretest difference) follows a normal distribution ($p = 0.200 > 0.05$), allowing the application of the t-test for related samples. Although the dimensions assertiveness, empathy, interpersonal relationships, and social responsibility showed p -values < 0.05 , the skewness and kurtosis values for each remained within ± 1.5 , indicating acceptable normality (Pérez & Medrano, 2010). Therefore, the t-test was applied to all

variables to assess pretest-posttest differences.

Table 3 presents the cutoff points used to categorize the scores for the total social skills variable and its four dimensions. Each score was classified into three levels low, medium, and high according to percentile distribution. Higher scores indicate greater development of social skills. Table 4 presents the distribution of participants across low, medium, and high levels of social skills and their dimensions before and after the intervention. In the overall social skills variable, 44.6% of students initially scored at a low level and none at a high level.

Table 3: Score Ranges and Cut-off Values for Social Skills and Their Dimensions (N = 139).

Level	Social skills	Assertiveness	Empathy	Interpersonal relationships	Social responsibility
Low	≤ 106	≤ 20	≤ 23	≤ 31	≤ 29
Medium	107-125	21-23	24-31	32-38	30-35
High	> 126	> 24	> 32	> 39	> 36

Source: Own elaboration (2025).

Table 4: Pretest and Posttest Levels of Social Skills and their Dimensions (N = 139).

	Pretest			Posttest		
	Level	Frequency	Percentage	Level	Frequency	Percentage
Social skills	Low	62	44.6%	Low	0	0.0%
	Medium	77	55.4%	Medium	76	54.7%
	High	0	0.0%	High	63	45.3%
Assertiveness	Low	47	33.8%	Low	31	22.3%
	Medium	78	56.1%	Medium	71	51.1%
	High	14	10.1%	High	37	26.6%
Empathy	Low	77	55.4%	Low	1	0.7%
	Medium	62	44.6%	Medium	79	56.8%
	High	0	0.0%	High	59	42.4%
Interpersonal relationships	Low	70	50.4%	Low	1	0.7%
	Medium	68	48.9%	Medium	77	55.4%
	High	1	0.7%	High	61	43.9%
Social Responsibility	Low	56	40.3%	Low	4	2.9%
	Medium	81	58.3%	Medium	93	66.9%
	High	2	1.4%	High	42	30.2%

Following the intervention, all participants moved out of the low category, and 45.3% reached a high level reflecting a significant overall improvement. In the dimension of assertiveness, the proportion of students at a high level increased from 10.1% to 26.6%, indicating enhanced confidence and communication abilities. Similarly, the empathy dimension showed notable gains: from 0% to 42.4% at a high level, alongside a shift from low to medium in the majority of cases. This suggests improved capacity for emotional understanding and compassionate response.

Interpersonal relationships also improved considerably, with high-level scores increasing from 0.7% to 43.9%. While the medium category remained relatively stable, the transition from low to high demonstrates stronger relational and teamwork capacities.

Regarding social responsibility, high-level scores rose from 1.4% to 30.2%, indicating greater internalization of values related to community involvement and ethical behavior. The majority remained in the medium category, highlighting a consistent, though gradual, development in this area.

Table 5: Paired Samples Statistics.

Difference (Posttest-pretest)	Paired differences								
	Mean	SD	SE	95% confidence interval of the difference					
				Inferior	Superior	t	df	Sig. (bilateral)	
Par 1	Social Skills	17.763	8.909	0.756	16.268	19.257	23.506	138	0.000
Par 2	Assertiveness	0.806	2.911	0.247	0.317	1.294	3.263	138	0.001
Par 3	Empathy	6.770	3.823	0.324	6.129	7.411	20.879	138	0.000
Par 4	Interpersonal relationships	6.173	3.969	0.337	5.507	6.838	18.336	138	0.000
Par 5	Social Responsibility	4.014	3.543	0.300	3.420	4.609	13.360	138	0.000

Note: SE = Standard error; CI = Confidence interval; df = degrees of freedom.

Table 5 presents the results of the paired-samples t-test comparing pretest and posttest scores for the total social skills variable and its four dimensions. All comparisons yielded statistically significant differences ($p < .001$), indicating improvements following the intervention.

The largest effect was observed in the overall social skills score, with a mean increase of 17.76 points ($t = 23.506$, $p < .001$). Empathy and interpersonal relationships also demonstrated notable gains, with mean differences of 6.77 and 6.17, respectively. Assertiveness showed a smaller, yet statistically significant, improvement ($M = 0.81$, $p =$

$.001$). Social responsibility increased by an average of 4.01 points, also reaching statistical significance ($p < .001$).

These results confirm that the positive emotions program produced meaningful and measurable gains in all targeted social skill domains, supporting the effectiveness of the intervention.

Table 6 shows the effect sizes obtained using Cohen's d and Hedges' g , which were calculated based on the standard deviation of the difference scores. Large effects were found for overall social skills ($d = 1.994$), empathy ($d = 1.771$), interpersonal relationships ($d = 1.555$), and social responsibility (d

= 1.133), confirming the strong impact of the program in these areas. In contrast, the assertiveness dimension showed a small effect size ($d = 0.277$),

suggesting a lower sensitivity to change under the applied intervention.

Table 6: Effect Sizes of Paired Samples (Cohen's d and Hedges' Correction).

	Difference (Posttest-pretest)	Standardizer	Estimation of points	95% confidence interval		
				Inferior	Superior	
Par 1	Social skills	d by Cohen	8.909	1.994	1.705	2.280
		Hedges' correction	8.933	1.988	1.700	2.274
Par 2	Assertiveness	d by Cohen	2.911	0.277	0.107	0.446
		Hedges' correction	2.919	0.276	0.107	0.444
Par 3	Empathy	d by Cohen	3.823	1.771	1.503	2.036
		Hedges' correction	3.833	1.766	1.499	2.031
Par 4	Interpersonal relationships	d by Cohen	3.969	1.555	1.306	1.801
		Hedges' correction	3.980	1.551	1.303	1.796
Par 5	Social Responsibility	d by Cohen	3.543	1.133	0.919	1.345
		Hedges' correction	3.552	1.130	.916	1.341

Note: Cohen's d and Hedges' g were calculated using the standard deviation of the difference scores. Hedges' correction adjusts for small sample bias.

These findings support previous research on the effectiveness of psychoeducational interventions for developing social skills in university contexts (Carnicero et al., 2023; Guerra-Báez, 2019). The results reinforce Goleman's (2018) proposition that emotional intelligence is not static but can be intentionally developed. They also challenge traditional developmental theories that assume social competence is primarily the product of maturation or informal experience, by showing that structured programs can produce significant, accelerated improvements.

The sharp improvement in empathy post-intervention (42.4% of students reached a high level) affirms the humanistic view of Rogers and Freiberg (1996), while also expanding it: empathy, rather than being just the product of a supportive environment, can be cultivated through structured psychoeducational strategies. The relatively modest gains in assertiveness, meanwhile, support the notion that socioemotional competencies do not evolve uniformly. Research by Caicedo (2023), Cueva et al. (2024), and García & Niño (2023) underscores the need for dimension-specific interventions, given the heterogeneous trajectories of emotional development observed in higher education.

The results of this study align partially with previous findings in similar educational contexts. Consistent with Israelashvili (2021), who demonstrated that positive emotions enhance resilience even under severe stress, our intervention also led to notable improvements in empathy, interpersonal relationships, and social responsibility. However, unlike the broad emotional gains reported in Israelashvili's large-scale survey, the assertiveness dimension in the current study showed only modest

effect sizes, underscoring a differential responsiveness among socioemotional competencies. In contrast, Ng et al. (2025) reported that brief, multicomponent positive education programs effectively enhanced mental well-being in diverse student populations a positive outcome echoed in our findings despite contextual differences. Still, Lyzwinski et al. (2024) pointed out that although many youth-focused positive psychology interventions yield mental health improvements, their impact on knowledge acquisition and self-efficacy remains limited. Similarly, Ke et al. (2022) found that resilience mediated the relationship between psychological distress and well-being, supporting our emphasis on emotional regulation and resilience within the program. These comparisons highlight an originality in our design: the tailored focus on assertiveness and social responsibility dimensions often underexplored in positive psychology research revealing nuanced pathways of socioemotional development in transition to university life. Nonetheless, limitations remain due to the absence of a control group and reliance on self-report measures, suggesting future studies should incorporate mixed methods to validate these results.

The study has limitations that must be considered when interpreting the findings. The use of a single-group pre-experimental design limits causal inference, and the lack of a control group makes it difficult to rule out natural maturation effects. The overrepresentation of women (71.2%) may also mask gender-specific responses, and the use of self-reports raises questions about the generalizability of the results to real-world behaviors. Despite these limitations, the findings open new research paths: Do

gender differences influence the development of social skills? Are some skills more foundational than others? Can sustained improvements be maintained over time? These insights support the integration of structured socioemotional development programs in higher education curricula as a central axis of post-pandemic recovery.

Although pre-experimental one-group pretest-posttest designs are commonly used in educational research, they present recognized methodological limitations. Marsden and Torgerson (2012) critically reviewed this design and highlighted threats to internal validity such as regression to the mean, testing effects, maturation, and historical events that can bias pretest-posttest comparisons. Similarly, conceptual frameworks on quasi-experimental designs emphasize that without a control group, causal interpretations must be cautious (SAGE Publications, 2019). Nonetheless, such designs remain frequent when experimental control is unfeasible, as long as their findings are considered exploratory and context-specific. In our case, the absence of a control group was mitigated by robust statistical testing and effect size analysis, providing meaningful evidence of change while acknowledging these limitations.

5. INNOVATIVE CONTRIBUTION OF THE STUDY

5.1. *Applied Innovation in Latin American Contexts*

This study presents an innovative approach to socioemotional recovery in the post-pandemic context by implementing a structured positive emotions program specifically targeted at first-year university students. While previous research has broadly explored emotional education, few studies have empirically tested interventions with comparable scope in Latin America. A systematic literature review demonstrated that socio-emotional competencies such as empathy and resilience enhance academic performance across university settings in Latin America (Garavito-Checalla *et al.*, 2025). The originality lies in combining principles of positive psychology, emotional intelligence, and humanistic education into a measurable intervention embedded in a formal university course. By focusing on specific social skills assertiveness, empathy, interpersonal relationships, and social responsibility the program not only facilitated students' adaptation to academic life but also provided concrete, quantifiable evidence of its effectiveness. This addresses a critical gap in post-pandemic higher

education: the lack of scalable, evidence-based socioemotional recovery strategies that can be systematically integrated into curricula.

5.2. *Theoretical Advancement*

The results of this study contribute to an ongoing theoretical debate on the nature of socioemotional skills. On the one hand, the significant gains observed in empathy, interpersonal relationships, and social responsibility reinforce perspectives from positive psychology and emotional intelligence theory, which frame these competencies as malleable through structured interventions. On the other hand, the modest improvement in assertiveness aligns with sociocultural and dispositional models suggesting certain competencies are more resistant to short-term change and heavily influenced by individual context (Martínez-Rodríguez & Ferreira, 2025). This duality indicates that socioemotional development should be understood not through a single theoretical lens, but as a multidimensional construct where some skills respond rapidly to educational interventions, while others may require longer or culturally tailored strategies.

These findings also contribute to the ongoing debate between trait-based and ability-based models of emotional intelligence. Trait models conceptualize socioemotional skills as relatively stable dispositions, while ability models (Mayer & Salovey, 2007) emphasize their malleability and development through learning processes. The significant improvements observed in empathy, interpersonal relationships, and social responsibility align more closely with the ability-based perspective, demonstrating that these competencies can be intentionally cultivated through structured interventions. However, the modest gains in assertiveness suggest partial support for trait-based accounts, highlighting the resistance of certain skills to short-term change. Taken together, the results point toward a mixed-model interpretation in which socioemotional competencies exhibit varying degrees of plasticity, with some dimensions proving more responsive to educational interventions than others. This nuanced understanding strengthens the theoretical positioning of the study and invites further exploration into which factors moderate the trainability of specific social skills.

5.3. *Critical and Forward-Looking Perspectives*

The findings of this study, although statistically robust, should be interpreted in light of broader theoretical and methodological debates. The evidence confirms the effectiveness of positive

emotion-based interventions in enhancing empathy and interpersonal relationships; however, the limited response in the assertiveness dimension raises questions about the heterogeneity in the development of socioemotional competencies (Martínez Rodríguez & Ferreira, 2025). This suggests that not all skills respond equally to short-term programs or to culturally specific contexts, partially aligning with literature that highlights the influence of dispositional and cultural factors in shaping assertiveness. In this sense, a new line of research emerges concerning the need for differentiated interventions by socioemotional dimension, as well as the analysis of moderating variables such as gender, cultural capital, and previous socialization experiences that may explain the observed variability. Such reflections not only enrich the interpretation of the results but also strengthen the study's contribution to a global debate: the need to consider emotional education in higher education not as a homogeneous package, but as a plural, situated, and dynamic process.

Taken together, the findings suggest a mixed-model perspective on socioemotional plasticity, where certain skills are highly trainable through structured interventions while others remain more context-bound. This conceptual integration represents a theoretical contribution from the Latin American context to the global debate on socioemotional development in higher education.

6. CONCLUSION

The findings of this study offer robust empirical evidence supporting the effectiveness of structured psychoeducational interventions specifically, a positive emotions program in enhancing social skills among first-year university students in the post-COVID-19 context. Statistically significant improvements ($p < .05$) were observed across all evaluated dimensions: assertiveness, empathy, interpersonal relationships, and social responsibility, validating the integration of socioemotional development into higher education curricula as a pedagogically sound and impactful strategy.

From a theoretical perspective, the study reinforces the foundational principles of humanistic psychology, positive psychology, and emotional intelligence theory. It confirms that social competencies, often perceived as secondary or naturally acquired, can in fact be cultivated intentionally through emotionally enriched, structured learning environments. This advances the understanding of social skill development as a trainable construct, particularly in post-crisis

contexts.

Practically, the program provides a replicable model for other universities seeking evidence-based tools to support the emotional recovery and academic adjustment of incoming students. The intervention's integration into an existing curricular course (Personal Development) demonstrates feasibility and cost-effectiveness, making it a scalable initiative.

Methodologically, the study contributes to the growing body of research advocating for rigorous evaluation of emotional education programs. The use of pre-post assessments, validated measurement instruments, and effect size analysis (Cohen's d) provides strong internal validity and encourages future longitudinal and comparative designs.

At the policy level, the study responds to the critical call by international organizations (e.g., WHO, UNICEF, UN) and national policies (e.g., National Educational Project to 2036 - Peru) to address mental health and emotional well-being in post-pandemic educational agendas. It advocates for the institutionalization of emotional and social skill development as a core component of quality education and student well-being.

In light of these contributions, the study urges a redefinition of higher education objectives, positioning socioemotional growth not as a complementary outcome but as a fundamental pillar of academic, professional, and civic formation.

Future research should expand beyond the Peruvian context to include multicultural and cross-national samples, which would allow for the identification of cultural factors that may moderate the effectiveness of positive emotion-based interventions. Longitudinal designs are also needed to determine the sustainability of socioemotional gains over time and to examine whether improvements translate into broader academic and professional outcomes. For instance, among a youth cohort from a state university, a longitudinal ACT-based positive psychology intervention demonstrated sustained improvements in resilience and self-compassion two years post-intervention (Arslan, Aydoğdu, & Uzun, 2025). In addition, adopting mixed-method approaches that combine quantitative assessments with qualitative insights such as student narratives and focus groups would provide a more nuanced understanding of the mechanisms underlying socioemotional change. This mixed-methods strategy has been shown to enhance the credibility and depth of intervention research in university contexts (Livermon et al., 2025). Such triangulation would not only strengthen causal

inference but also capture the lived experiences and contextual subtleties often missed in purely quantitative designs.

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