

# Childhood storytelling experiences and positive mental health among Vietnamese university students: A cross-sectional study

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## ABSTRACT

Childhood storytelling experiences have been linked to resilience and well-being, but research on their relationship with positive mental health among Vietnamese university students is limited. This study examined this association among 364 undergraduate students at the University of Social Sciences and Humanities in Ho Chi Minh City. Retrospective data were gathered on three aspects of childhood storytelling experiences from the ages of 6-13: storytellers, story genres, and story usage ability as adults. Positive mental health was assessed using a validated scale. Most students reported occasional storytelling experiences, with mothers and teachers being the most common storytellers. Personal family stories and folktales were frequently heard. As adults, the students felt that story recall helped reinforce values, cope with difficulties, and share stories with others. Self-ratings indicated moderately positive mental health. Correlation analysis revealed significant positive relationships between all three aspects of the storytelling experience and current positive mental health. Students later in life correlated enhanced positive mental health with more frequent, diverse childhood storytelling experiences involving different storytellers and genres, as well as a retained ability to recall and retell cherished stories. These findings contribute to the limited research on this topic in Vietnam. Further investigation using longitudinal and mixed-methods approaches is warranted to deepen the understanding of storytelling's impacts. The limitations include retrospective self-reporting and the cultural specificity of the positive mental health measure.

**Keywords:** Childhood storytelling experiences, Positive mental health, Vietnamese university students, Cross-sectional study, Protective factors

## Introduction

Storytelling has long been recognized as a valuable practice with potential benefits for resilience, stress reduction, and overall

well-being [1, 2]. While research has explored these positive impacts across cultures, there is a lack of investigation into the relationship between childhood storytelling experiences and positive mental health among Vietnamese university students.

A cross-cultural study by Nguyen and Stanley (2015) found that Vietnamese students reported diverse childhood storytelling experiences, with mothers and teachers being the primary storytellers and folktales containing morals being the most commonly accessed genre [3]. These findings indicate the significance of storytelling in Vietnamese culture. However, limited research has examined how these early experiences might contribute to positive mental health outcomes later in life.

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Promoting positive mental health, defined as well-being, healthy relationships, and positive emotions, has become increasingly important alongside traditional approaches to mental health services [4, 5]. University students often face significant academic and personal stressors that can impact their mental health, making the examination of factors contributing to positive mental health in this population crucial [6].

To address this gap, the current study investigates the relationship between childhood storytelling experiences and positive mental health among Vietnamese university students. Specifically, we assessed the extent and nature of childhood storytelling experiences, including the primary storytellers, the genres of stories heard, and the perceived ability to recall and share stories. Furthermore, we evaluated the levels of positive mental health among participants and examined the potential associations between these two domains.

By contributing to the limited existing literature on this topic within the Vietnamese context, this research aims to provide insights into the potential protective role of storytelling in promoting well-being among university students. Exploring the connections between early narrative experiences and later positive mental health outcomes is essential because it may inform efforts to support the overall well-being of this population.

## Materials and Methods

This study employed quantitative methods to investigate the relationship between childhood storytelling experiences and positive mental health among Vietnamese university students. A cross-sectional survey design was used to gather retrospective data on participants' storytelling experiences during childhood (ages 6-13) and assess their current state of positive mental health.

### *Research design and subjects*

We collected data from February 2023 to June 2023 by distributing self-administered questionnaires to university students. A convenience sampling method was used to recruit 364 full-time undergraduate participants (262 females and 102 males) from various disciplines at the University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam National University, Ho Chi Minh City (VNUHCM-USSH). All eligible students with the same grade levels were informed about the study's objectives and procedures, and those who provided written consent were included in the sample.

### *Research instruments*

The research instrument comprised a self-administered questionnaire with four main sections:

- i. Demographic information: collected participants' background details.

- ii. Childhood Storytelling Experiences Scale: Assessed aspects of storytelling experiences, including frequency, duration, storytellers (5 items), genres (5 items), and usage (3 items). This 13-item scale had a 5-point response scale ranging from "Never or do not remember" to "Very often" [3, 7].
- iii. Brief Resilience Scale: This 5-item scale was adapted for Vietnamese adolescents by Le and Nguyen (2022) using a 5-point Likert scale [8].
- iv. Positive Mental Health Scale: This is a 9-item scale that assesses subjective perceptions of positive emotions, well-being, and life satisfaction, with a 4-point response scale from "Strongly disagree" to "Strongly agree." This scale was developed based on several previously validated instruments [6].

### *Statistical analysis*

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS version 20.0. We calculated descriptive statistics such as means, standard deviations (SD), frequencies, and percentages to summarize sample characteristics, self-reported childhood storytelling experiences, and current positive mental health. Reliability analyses were conducted using Cronbach's alpha, with a minimum value of 0.7, which is considered acceptable. We performed exploratory factor analysis (EFA) with principal component analysis and varimax rotation to assess the construct validity of the scales. Significant Bartlett's tests ( $p < 0.05$ ) and Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) values greater than 0.6 were deemed acceptable for EFA. Pearson's correlation coefficient was used to examine the relationships between childhood storytelling experiences and positive mental health scores. Statistical significance was determined at  $p < 0.05$ .

## Results and Discussion

The results are presented in three main sections: 1) reliability and validity analyses of the research scales, 2) description of participants' childhood storytelling experiences, and 3) examination of the relationship between storytelling experiences and positive mental health.

### *Reliability and validity analyses*

Reliability and validity analyses were conducted to evaluate the psychometric properties of the Childhood Storytelling Experiences and Positive Mental Health scales. **Table 1** presents the reliability analysis (Cronbach's alpha and item-total correlations) and exploratory factor analysis (KMO measure, eigenvalues, variance explained, and factor loadings) results for the Childhood Storytelling Experiences and Positive Mental Health scales.

As shown in **Table 1**, both scales demonstrated satisfactory reliability, with Cronbach's alpha values above 0.7 for all subscales. Item-total correlations were above 0.3 for all items except for one item removed from the Positive Mental Health

Scale. Exploratory factor analysis supported the construct validity of both scales, yielding KMO values above 0.6,

significant Bartlett's tests ( $p < 0.05$ ), and factor loadings aligning with the original theoretical frameworks.

**Table 1. Reliability and exploratory factor analysis results for childhood storytelling and positive mental health scales**

Scale	No. of items	Reliability analysis			EFA results	
		Cronbach's alpha	Item-total correlation	KMO measure	Eigenvalue and variance explained	Factor loadings
<b>Childhood storytelling experiences</b>						
Storytellers	5	0.721	0.418 - 0.525	0.769 ( $p = 0.000$ )	1.563 (57.061%)	Three components (0.531 - 0.906)
Story genres	5	0.737	0.442 - 0.605			
Storytelling usage	3	0.859	0.679 - 0.779			
<b>Positive Mental Health</b>	8*	0.887	0.577 - 0.735	0.896 ( $p = 0.000$ )	4.579 (57.231%)	One component (0.673 - 0.822)

Notes: \*: One item was removed from the Positive Mental Health scale because of a low item-total correlation ( $<0.3$ ). KMO: Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy.

### Childhood storytelling experiences

Descriptive statistics were calculated to summarize participants' self-reported childhood storytelling experiences across three main domains: storytellers, story genres, and story usage ability as adults. **Table 2** presents the frequency, percentage, mean, and standard deviation of students' self-reported childhood storytelling experiences, including the most common storytellers, types of stories remembered, and story usage ability as adults.

As shown in **Table 2**, most participants reported occasional ("sometimes") childhood storytelling experiences. Mothers and teachers were the most frequent storytellers, whereas personal family stories and folktales were the most commonly heard genres. Religious stories were the least frequent. Regarding story usage ability, participants felt that recalling stories helped reinforce values, cope with difficulties, and share stories with others.

**Table 2. Descriptive statistics for students' self-assessed childhood storytelling experiences**

Contents	Frequency					Mean	SD
	1	2	3	4	5		
<b>Most common storytellers</b>						<b>3.02</b>	<b>0.67</b>
Father	8.2	26.4	40.9	22.0	2.5	2.84	0.94
Mother	4.7	14.3	42.3	26.1	12.6	3.28	1.01
Grandparents	6.3	25.3	41.8	17.3	9.3	2.98	1.02
Teachers	2.2	19.2	42.0	26.4	10.2	3.23	0.94
Acquaintances	7.4	33.5	37.4	17.0	4.7	2.78	0.97
<b>Types of Stories Remembered</b>						<b>3.30</b>	<b>0.68</b>
I was told personal stories	1.1	11.0	19.2	37.9	30.8	3.86	1.01
I was told folktales: stories about make-believe, magic, and good and evil	1.4	6.6	23.9	48.4	19.8	3.79	0.88
I was told literary tales (stories from books and movies)	11.5	17.6	29.9	32.4	8.5	3.09	1.13
I was told religious stories	14.0	44.8	30.8	8.2	2.2	2.40	0.90
I was told blended stories (stories that blend the personal + folktale + literary)	4.7	7.7	44.8	28.8	14.0	3.40	0.97
<b>Story usage ability</b>						<b>3.14</b>	<b>0.97</b>
Telling favorite stories to others	5.5	22.0	40.7	23.6	8.2	3.07	1.00
Recalling helps cope with present difficulties by remembering meaningful stories	6.0	28.3	30.5	20.6	14.6	3.09	1.14
Recalling favorite childhood stories helps reinforce important values	9.6	13.7	31.6	29.4	15.7	3.28	1.17
<b>Overall</b>						<b>3.16</b>	<b>0.56</b>

Note: Scale points range from 1 (Never or do not remember) to 5 (Very often).

### Positive mental health

Self-ratings of positive mental health were analyzed using descriptive statistics, as presented in **Table 3**. This table shows

the frequency, percentage, mean, and standard deviation of students' self-ratings of positive mental health, including their level of agreement with well-being, emotions, and life satisfaction statements.

Most students “agreed” with statements about their positive mental health, with the highest ratings for enjoying life, feeling joy, and life satisfaction. Lower ratings were observed for being

in good physical/emotional condition and feeling well-equipped to handle difficulties.

**Table 3. Descriptive statistics for students’ self-assessed positive mental health status**

Contents	Level of agreement				Mean	SD
	1	2	3	4		
I am often carefree and in good spirits	8.2	30.8	41.5	19.5	2.72	0.87
I enjoy my life	0.3	18.7	59.1	22.0	3.03	0.64
Overall, I am satisfied with my life	0.5	28.8	44.0	26.6	2.97	0.76
I manage well to fulfill my needs	0.0	33.0	54.1	12.9	2.80	0.64
I am in good physical and emotional condition	5.2	40.4	39.6	14.8	2.64	0.79
I am well-equipped to deal with life and its difficulties	6.0	37.6	42.9	13.5	2.64	0.78
Much of what I do brings me joy	0.0	28.0	43.4	28.6	3.01	0.75
I am a calm, balanced human being	0.8	31.0	56.6	11.5	2.79	0.64
<b>Overall</b>					<b>2.82</b>	<b>0.55</b>

Note: Scale points range from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 4 (Strongly agree).

### *Relationship between storytelling and positive mental health*

We conducted correlation analyses to assess the relationship between childhood storytelling experiences and positive mental

health. **Table 4** presents the Pearson correlation coefficients and significance levels for the relationships between the three domains of childhood storytelling experiences (storytellers, story genres, and story usage ability) and positive mental health.

**Table 4. Correlations between childhood storytelling experiences and positive mental health**

Childhood storytelling experiences	Positive Mental Health	
Storytellers	Pearson Correlation	0.429**
	p (2-tailed)	0.000
Story genres heard/read	Pearson Correlation	0.495**
	p (2-tailed)	0.000
Story usage ability	Pearson Correlation	0.532**
	p (2-tailed)	0.000
<b>Overall</b>	<b>Pearson Correlation</b>	<b>0.642**</b>
	<b>p (2-tailed)</b>	<b>0.000</b>

Note: \*\* indicates significance at  $p < 0.01$ .

Significant positive correlations were found between all three domains of childhood storytelling experiences (storytellers, genres, and usage ability) and current positive mental health, with correlation coefficients ranging from 0.429 to 0.532 ( $p < 0.01$ ). The overall correlation between childhood storytelling experiences and positive mental health was moderate at 0.642 ( $p < 0.01$ ). These findings indicate that more frequent, diverse childhood storytelling involving different storytellers and genres and retained story recall/retelling ability were associated with enhanced positive mental health among students later in life.

This study contributes to the limited research on the relationship between childhood storytelling experiences and positive mental health among Vietnamese university students. The key findings revealed significant positive correlations between all three domains of childhood storytelling (storytellers, story genres, and usage) and current positive mental health, with an overall

moderate correlation of 0.642. These results indicate that more frequent and diverse childhood storytelling experiences, including exposure to different storytellers such as mothers and teachers, accessing various genres such as personal stories and folktales, and retaining the ability to recall and share cherished narratives, are associated with enhanced positive mental health among students later in life.

These findings align with prior research demonstrating the potential protective role of storytelling for resilience and well-being [1, 3]. The positive associations observed in this study support the notion that storytelling experiences during childhood may cultivate psychological resources and coping strategies that contribute to better mental health outcomes in adulthood. The ability to recall and share meaningful stories may facilitate the reinforcement of values, the development of problem-solving

skills, and the processing of emotions, all of which can contribute to overall well-being [2, 7].

Despite these contributions, several limitations should be acknowledged. The retrospective, self-report nature of assessing childhood experiences may be susceptible to recall bias, as participants' memories of storytelling events from a young age could be influenced by factors such as emotional salience or current mental states. Additionally, the Positive Mental Health Scale, while validated, was newly adapted for Vietnamese participants, and its psychometric properties in this specific population require further evaluation. The study's cross-sectional design prevents the establishment of causal relationships between childhood storytelling experiences and positive mental health outcomes. Moreover, the convenience sampling method may restrict the generalizability of the findings to a wider population of Vietnamese university students.

To address these limitations, future research should consider employing longitudinal designs that track childhood storytelling experiences and mental health outcomes over time, thereby reducing the reliance on retrospective reports and allowing for the examination of causal relationships. Cross-cultural studies that compare storytelling traditions and norms across different societies could provide valuable insights into the role of cultural context. Qualitative approaches, such as in-depth interviews or focus group discussions, may offer richer insights into the meanings and perceived impacts of storytelling experiences from the participants' perspectives. Furthermore, the use of well-established, culturally validated measures of positive mental health would strengthen this construct's assessment in future studies.

Despite these limitations, this study has several notable strengths. To the authors' knowledge, this is one of the first studies to empirically investigate the relationship between childhood storytelling experiences and positive mental health among Vietnamese university students. Using validated and culturally adapted scales to assess both storytelling experiences and positive mental health components improves the findings' reliability and validity. The relatively large sample size of 364 participants from diverse disciplines across all undergraduate year levels also contributes to the results' robustness. Furthermore, assessing multiple domains of storytelling experiences, including storytellers, genres, and usage abilities, provides a comprehensive understanding of the potential influences of storytelling on well-being.

This study provides initial evidence that more extensive childhood storytelling experiences involving diverse storytellers, genres, and retained narrative abilities are associated with enhanced positive mental health among Vietnamese university students. These findings, although limited by retrospective self-reports and the use of a newly adapted mental health scale, align with prior literature and contribute to understanding storytelling as a potential protective factor for well-being in this population. Further investigation using longitudinal and mixed-methods approaches is warranted to deepen the understanding of storytelling's impacts.

## Conclusion

This study investigated the relationship between childhood storytelling experiences and current positive mental health among 364 Vietnamese university students. The purpose of this study was to examine this association, contributing to limited research on this topic within the local context. The results demonstrated significant positive correlations between all three domains of childhood storytelling experiences (storytellers, story genres, and usage ability) and positive mental health, with an overall moderate correlation of 0.642. These findings indicate that more frequent and diverse childhood storytelling involving different storytellers, accessing various genres, and retaining narrative recall/retelling abilities are associated with enhanced positive mental health among university students later in life.

This study contributes to existing knowledge by providing initial empirical evidence for the potential protective role of childhood storytelling in promoting well-being among Vietnamese university students. Although limited by retrospective self-report data and the cultural specificity of the positive mental health measure, the results align with prior research indicating that storytelling may cultivate resilience and positive traits.

Despite these contributions, the retrospective nature of the data and the use of a newly adapted mental health scale warrant further investigation using longitudinal and mixed-methods approaches to deepen the understanding of storytelling's impacts on this population. Nonetheless, this study offers a foundation for continued exploration of storytelling as a factor potentially contributing to positive mental health among Vietnamese university students.

The findings highlight the potential value of promoting storytelling experiences and narrative skills from an early age, as they may have lasting positive impacts on mental health and well-being. We should develop and evaluate educational programs and interventions that incorporate storytelling activities for their effectiveness in enhancing protective factors and resilience among young people. Overall, this study underscores the importance of further investigating the role of storytelling in fostering positive mental health outcomes among diverse populations.

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**Ethics statement:** This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles and guidelines established by the University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam National University, Ho Chi Minh City (VNUHCM-USSH). Formal ethical approval was not required because the study involved only the collection of anonymous survey responses from voluntary participants. No sensitive or personally identifiable information was gathered. The study strictly adhered to data protection and privacy regulations. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to their participation, ensuring that they were aware of the study's objectives, procedures, and rights as research subjects. The participants' confidentiality and privacy were safeguarded throughout the research process.

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