FROM PRESSURE TO PERFORMANCE: ACADEMIC STRESS, SELF-CONFIDENCE, AND ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT AMONG SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS IN PAKISTAN

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Abstract

This paper examines the connection between academic stress and self-confidence and academic achievement among students in secondary schools. As the value of academic performance in learning institutions across the globe continues to gain prominence, it is critical to know what makes students successful. The paper examines the effects of academic requirements like examinations, assignments, and expectations on the level of stress and academic performance in students. It also examines the impact of students' self-confidence on their cognitive thinking about their ability to achieve success in school. The study was aimed at investigating the correlation between academic stress, academic self-confidence and academic success among high school students. A sample of 400 students (9th and 10th grade students) of public and private high school students in District Lahore was used to collect data. The sample consisted of both male and female students. The analysis of the data was done with the Statistical Package of Social Sciences version 26. Mean scores were computed, and t-test and Pearson correlation coefficient were applied to find out the relationships between the variables. Academic stress was measured using the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS) which was created by Sheldon Cohen and its reliability coefficient was 0.972. The Self-Confidence Scale of Omidullah Akbari was modified to assess self-confidence and the reliability of the scale is 0.949. The general validity of the questionnaire was 0.952. The instrument has been validated and proven to be reliable by way of a pilot study and an expert opinion before being applied in the local context. The results showed that there is negative correlation between academic stress and academic performance, meaning that the more the stress level, the less the academic performance. On the other hand, positive correlation was established between self-confidence and academic success meaning that students who have higher self-confidence are more likely to perform better in academics. The paper also points out that self-confidence may serve as a buffer to adverse impact of academic stress, and help towards enhanced resilience and grades. According to the results, it is suggested that learning institutions should adopt the strategies that would help alleviate academic pressures and improve the self-esteem of students. Programs like the stress management programs, counselling services, and building confidence programs can also go a long way in improving the academic performance of students. This research is helpful in explaining the multifaceted connection between the academic stress, self-confidence and academic performance and offers practical findings to educators, policymakers and parents who serve students in secondary schools.

Keywords: Academic Achievement, Academic Stress, Self-Confidence

Introduction

Academic stress is a multifaceted and individual experience that is dependent on temperament and environment and previous experiences. Generally, stress is a state of internal psychological being that develops when people feel that demands are difficult to manage or demands are greater than their coping mechanisms. Stress is a normal occurrence in life, though it is usually viewed as negative and usually encountered in academics (Misra and McKean, 2000). Academic stress is inevitable to students as they are faced with some

form of academic pressure in their day to day academic activities like assignments, tests and expectations by their teachers and parents.

In the wider context of education psychology and student welfare, there is a lot of attention to the connection between academic stress, self-confidence and student academic performance. At the higher secondary level, students tend to bear more academic challenges and performance pressure, as well as learn independently (Kumar and Dixit, 2019). It is also in this transitional stage when the psychological and social growth is at a high level and hence students are more susceptible to stress (Misra and McKean, 2000).

The stress in academics is generally understood as the pressure that one undergoes in relation to academic needs (Zurlo et al., 2020). Overloading at work, competitive tests, fear of failure, and confusion about the future career among students are some of the causes of stress (Kumar and Dixit, 2019). Academic stress can have adverse effects on motivation, mental health, and academic performance of students in case it is persistent (Alvarez et al., 2009).

Self-confidence, on the contrary, is protective in school. Self-confidence is one of the beliefs an individual has regarding his or her ability to effectively complete the tasks and attain goals (Bandura, 1997). More confident students have greater chances of dealing with academic problems successfully, setting achievable objectives, and perseverance in the wake of adversities (Lane et al., 2004). Therefore, self-confidence helps in resilience, enhanced well-being, and academic achievements.

There is also positive self-perception, self-awareness and acceptance of own abilities that are connected with self-confidence (Carson et al., 2001). Even though a part of confidence might be acquired at an early age, it also keeps on changing as a person grows through experiences and interpersonal interactions (Şar et al., 2010). Researchers usually differentiate internal and external confidence (see Figure 1): internal confidence is associated with self-belief and emotional stability, whereas external confidence is manifested in communication abilities and socialization (Şar et al., 2010).

Even the earlier studies have shown that self-confidence is a significant psychological variable that determines the academic performance of students (Craven et al., 1991; Hay, 1997). When students have confidence in themselves, they are more likely to show greater motivation, greater involvement in their studies and improved educational performance (Alias & Hafir, 2009). On the same note, Bachman and O Malley (1980) established that self-confidence positively correlated with both academic competence and education achievement.

In general, the available literature reveals that academic stress and self-confidence are important factors that influence academic performance of students. Although too much academic pressure can be counterproductive to achieving success and performance, increase self-confidence can enable students, who are stressed, to handle stress and achieve more in school.

Literature Review

Academic Achievement in Secondary Education

It is generally accepted that academic success is a significant measure of educational effectiveness, and it greatly determines how students will succeed in their future academic and career life. It is defined as the degree of knowledge, skills and competencies learnt by the student during the learning process and is normally assessed in terms of grades, examination results and standardized tests (Deary et al., 2007). Nevertheless, academic achievement is a concept that is not confined to cognitive performance as well as is viewed as an indicator of the intellectual growth, motivation, and socio-emotional well-being of students in secondary education. At this level, students have greater academic demands and expectation of

performance and this may have great impact on the academic performance (Sirin, 2005). The conceptualization of academic achievement by Bloom et al. (1956) assumed a multidimensional construct with the three domains of cognitive, affective, and psychomotor. Therefore, the student academic performance depends on a range of personal, psychological, and environmental factors.The recent literature has pointed out the significance of the psychological variables in defining the academic performance of the students. Other non-cognitive traits like motivation, resilience, and self-belief were identified to be significant predictors of academic success in students (Wu et al., 2022). These results emphasize that academic performance is not only influenced by intellectual performance, but also by psychological and emotional influences like stress and confidence.

Academic Stress among Secondary School Students

The problem of academic stress is one of the most popular topics of educational psychology especially among the students attending secondary schools. Academic stress is a process of emotional, psychological, and physical strain to which a student is exposed to as a result of academic requirements, anticipation, and strain in academic institutions (Suldo et al., 2014). The shift to secondary education tends to expose students to more academic tasks, competitiveness and high performance demands (Huang, 2013).

The common stressors are the large amount of coursework, exams, the fear of failure, and the uncertainty concerning further education opportunities (Zhang et al., 2018). Such stressors may have adverse impacts on the psychological health and the performance of students. In El Ansari et al. (2014), they discovered that the more academic stress the students had in secondary school, the more anxiety and depression symptoms they experienced. On the same note, Klassen et al. (2008) indicated that academic stress and academic achievement have a negative correlation implying that too much stress can decrease the concentration and academic involvement of students.

The notion of academic stress is generally elaborated by using transactional theory of stress and coping advanced by Lazarus and Folkman (1984). This theory holds that stress arises when people feel that environmental demands are higher than their coping capacities. Whereas it takes place in learning settings, students might feel stressed when academic assignments, exams or demands look overwhelming. Personal factors that contribute to stress levels among students are individual personality and other factors like coping and social support systems (Zeidner, 2007).

A number of sources are the cause of academic stress in the secondary level. One of the most prevalent stressors in students is academic pressure to perform well in their grades. There are high expectations among parents, teachers, and institutions on students to excel in their academic studies, and this may cause anxiety and psychological distress (Deb et al., 2015). Another important factor is the examination-related stress. Students might be placed under a lot of pressure due to the fear of failure and the repercussions of bad performance (Putwain, 2008).

The problems of workload and time management are also the causes of stress among students. Handling various assignments, projects and extracurricular activities may overwhelm a student and may further influence his or her academic performance (Dahlin et al., 2005). Moreover, academic pressure among fellow learners in the school setting may increase the academic pressure especially in very competitive school systems (Verma and Gupta, 1990). Relationships between teachers and students are also significant in the struggles of students. Students can rely on supportive teachers to overcome the stress of

school and negative experiences might make them feel stressed and isolated (Hughes and Cavell, 1999).

The current studies have also underscored the increasing incidence of academic stress in students. Research that was carried out during and after the COVID-19 pandemic showed that student stress levels were greatly enhanced by the changes in the traditional learning environment, challenges in online education, and social isolation (Frontiers in Education, 2023). Equally, systematic reviews have indicated that academic stress correlates closely with mental issues like anxiety, depression, and low academic motivation (Hadi et al., 2025). These results show that academic stress management is critical in ensuring well-being and academic success of students.

Self-Confidence and Academic Achievement

Another important psychological aspect that determines academic performance and aptitude of students in coping with academic stress is self-confidence. Self-confidence is the opinion that a person has on his/her ability to accomplish tasks and attain the intended objectives (Bandura, 1997). High self-confidence students tend to engage in persistence, motivation and positive attitude towards learning.

Studies have always revealed that self-confidence is significant in determining the academic behaviors and performances of students. Pajares (2003) pointed out that students who possess hope in their abilities are more likely to have high goals, learning strategies, and since they are motivated in the academic tasks. On the same note, Zimmerman (2000) established that confident students tend to use adaptive coping strategies and they tend to be more resilient in their academic performance.

Students also have self-confidence, which leads to their psychological well-being and personal growth. High self-confidence individuals are likely to have positive self-perceptions, are more emotionally stable and driven towards the accomplishment of academic objectives (Carson et al., 2001). These attributes help students to cope with academic stresses in a better manner, which helps them to stay in control of their academic performance.

The positive correlation between self confidence and academic achievement has been further corroborated by recent studies. Research has shown that non-cognitive variables, self-confidence, and other variables, including resilience and motivation, play an important role in determining the success of students in academic life (Wu et al., 2022). Besides, self-confidence has the potential to serve as a buffer that mitigates the adverse effects of academic stress on the academic performance of the students.

Relationship between Academic Stress, Self-Confidence, and Academic Achievement

Academic stress, self-confidence, and academic achievement have been popular subjects of academic research. Although the overload of academic stress may affect the learning and well-being of students adversely, self-confidence may give the students better mechanisms of tackling academic challenges. Recent research has stressed that academic stress can be addressed by psychological resilience and nurturing learning conditions in students with strong self-confidence which can help to reduce the adverse consequences of academic stress (Bandura, 1997). Higher self-confidence plays a role in increasing the resilience of students, their coping skills and academic performance. As a result of this fact, the educational institutions are motivated more to create programs that alleviate academic stress and enhance psychological well-being and confidence in the students.

Generally, literature indicates that academic stress and self-confidence are the key factors which determine academic achievement among high school students. The complicated

dependence between these variables is a key to the development of educational strategies that will help students achieve academic success and psychological growth.

Research Questions

o What is the relationship between academic stress and academic achievement?
o What is the relationship between self-confidence and academic achievement?
o What is the relationship between academic stress and self-confidence?

Research Methodology

Research Design

The research design used in this study was quantitative, descriptive, and correlational research design, which was used to investigate the relationship between academic stress, self-confidence, and academic achievement among secondary school students. Data collection method was done through the survey method to be able to collect information on a large sample. The correlational design was selected because the researchers needed to establish the nature and strength of the relationship between the variables of the study (Cohen et al., 2007).

Population

Students in the secondary schools of District Lahore (public and private) made up the population, both males and females. Students in Grade IX and X were chosen, since they undergo more academic challenges and pressure on performance and are the right respondents to investigate the effect of academic stress and self-confidence on academic success.

Sample

The stratified random sampling was used in the selection of 400 students. The stratification was done according to gender and the type of school (public or private) in order to have a representative sample. The method was selected with the aim of addressing the issues of time, availability and affordability as well as ensuring that the population was representative (Cohen et al., 2007).

Instruments

Perceived Stress Scale

Students were measured in terms of the academic stress through the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS) created by Cohen et al. (1983). This scale determines the perceptions of students about stress that is caused by academic requirements, exams, and performance expectations.

Self-Confidence Questionnaire

The questionnaire that was used to quantify self-confidence was created by Omidullah Akbari and it helps to assess the belief of students in their capability to reach their academic objectives.

The two tools were useful to offer a holistic method of analyzing the association between stress, self-confidence, and academic performance.

Validity

Validity is a concept which defines the degree to which an instrument measures what it is supposed to measure (Bryman, 2001). The self-confidence questionnaire and PSS were expertly reviewed to validate the questionnaires. The relevance, the clarity and suitability of the items was determined by experts so as to match with the objectives of the study.

Reliability

Reliability implies the consistency of a tool. The reliability coefficient of the Perceived Stress Scale was 0.972 and Self-Confidence Scale had a coefficient of 0.949. The level of reliability

of the combined questionnaire was excellent with a value of 0.952 and this showed internal consistency.

Pilot Testing

The questionnaire items were tested on a small group of secondary school students to identify the clarity, readability and applicability of the questionnaire items. The pilot study also provided feedback that helped in refining the instrument so as to make it accurate and useful in the main study.

Data Collection Procedure

The surveys were done in both the public and the private secondary schools in District Lahore. The questionnaires were filled by students in Grade IX and X both male and female. School authorities were consulted and students told about the reason of the study. The response was voluntary and respondent confidentiality was guaranteed.

Data Analysis

The analysis of the data was performed with the help of IBM SPSS Statistics version 26.0. Descriptive and inferential statistics were used. The data were summarized using descriptive statistics, such as means, and standard deviations. Academic stress, self-confidence, and academic achievement relationships were established via inferential statistics including the use of Independent Sample t-tests and Pearson Product-Moment Correlation. Findings were displayed in tables and thoroughly explained.

Result and Discussion

RQ.1: What is the relationship between academic stress and academic achievement?

Table 1: Relationship between Academic Stress and Academic Achievement

Variables	N	r-value	Sig. (p)	Interpretation
Academic Stress & Academic Achievement	400	0.48	0.01	Moderate positive correlation
Emotional Stress & Academic Achievement	400	0.44	0.005	Moderate positive correlation
Academic Self-Efficacy & Workload Stress & Academic Achievement	400	0.49	0.035	Low positive correlation
Physical Stress & Academic Achievement	400	0.61	0.004	Fairly strong positive correlation
Social Stress & Academic Achievement	400	0.71	0.018	Moderate positive correlation

Table 1 shows Pearson Product Moment Correlation coefficients of the various forms of academic stress and academic achievement of students. The outcomes show that there is a somewhat positive correlation between stress and achievement. To be specific, academic stress was positively correlated with emotional stress (r = 0.48, p = 0.01) with a moderate positive correlation with achievement (r = 0.44, p= 0.005). There was a rather high positive relationship between physical stress (r = 0.61, p = 0.004) and social stress (r = 0.71, p = 0.018). The study found a low positive correlation between academic self-efficacy and workload stress (r = 0.49, p = 0.035), indicating that the moderately positive relationship between the capacity to cope with workload and academic performance exists among students. On the whole, these results suggest that an effective management of various types of academic stress can be linked to academic performance in a positive way.

RQ.2: What is the relationship between self-confidence and academic achievement?

Table 2: Relationship between Self-Confidence and Academic Achievement

Variables	N	r-value	Sig. (p)	Interpretation
Self-Confidence & Academic Achievement	400	0.449	0.038	Low positive correlation
Self-Confidence in Class & Academic Achievement	400	0.173	0.068	Negligible correlation
Self-Confidence to Perform Well in Exam & Academic Achievement	400	0.271	0.055	Negligible correlation
Self-Confidence to Ask Questions & Academic Achievement	400	0.814	0.012	High positive correlation
Self-Confidence in Class Participation & Revision & Academic Achievement	400	0.261	0.056	Negligible correlation
Self-Confidence to Attain Goals & Academic Achievement	400	0.147	0.073	Negligible correlation
Self-Confidence to Work Independently & Academic Achievement	400	0.563	0.029	Moderate positive correlation

Table 2 indicates the relationship between different dimensions of self-confidence on the one hand and academic achievement of students on the other hand. The findings represent a low positive correlation between self-confidence in general and academic achievement ($r = 0.449$, $p = 0.038$). There was a high positive correlation between self-confidence to ask questions ($r = 0.814$, $p = 0.012$) which indicates the significance of active participation in the classroom to achieve a higher academic performance. A moderate positive correlation ($r = 0.563$, $p = 0.029$) also existed between self-confidence to work independently. Other types of self-confidence like confidence in participating classroom, achieving goals or performing well in exams had negligible or low correlations with academic achievement, and it may not be true that all types of self-confidence are equally important to student success. These results underscore the fact that certain self-confidence behaviours, especially inquiry and independent work, have a strong association with academic achievement.

RQ.3: What is relationship between academic stress and self-confidence?

Table 3: Relationship between Academic Stress and Self-Confidence

Variables	N	r-value	Sig. (p)	Interpretation
Academic Stress & Self-Confidence	400	0.705	0.019	Moderate positive correlation
Academic Stress & Self-Confidence in Class	400	0.732	0.017	Moderate positive correlation
Academic Stress & Self-Confidence to Perform Well in Exam	400	0.542	0.31	Moderate positive correlation (not significant)
Academic Stress & Self-Confidence to Ask Questions	400	0.798	0.013	High positive correlation
Academic Stress & Self-Confidence in Class Participation & Revision	400	0.438	0.039	Low positive correlation
Academic Stress & Self-Confidence to Attain Goals	400	0.762	0.015	High positive correlation

Academic Stress & Self-Confidence to Work Independently	400	0.718	0.018	High positive correlation

Table 3 shows the relationship between academic stress and various aspects of self-confidence among the students. The findings indicate that academic stress is positively correlated with self-confidence in most cases. The overall self confidence was the only variable that was perceived to have a medium positive relationship with stress (r = 0.705, p = 0.019) and self confidence in class participation and independent work also reported moderate to high correlations (r = 0.718-0.732, p = 0.018). Academic stress was positively correlated with self-confidence to ask questions and to achieve goals (r = 0.7620.798, p ≤ 0.015), and it is possible to conclude that students with moderate levels of stress could be found to have high levels of self-confidence in their active participation in academic activities. These findings suggest that academic stress with effective management can be associated with increased self-confidence especially in goal-oriented and participatory behaviours.

Discussion

This research was aimed at discussing the connection between academic stress, self-confidence and academic achievement in students. The results indicate some critical trends which lead to the realization of the effect of psychological and academic factors on the performance of students.

The findings of RQ1 showed that academic stress and academic achievement have a positive correlation. There is a moderate and positive relationship between academic stress and academic achievement (r = 0.48, p = 0.01). This implies that some form of stress will encourage students to put more effort in their studies and achieve higher grades. In the same manner, emotional stress also showed a moderate positive relation with achievement (r=0.44,p=0.005). The implications of these findings are that moderate emotional pressures involving academic tasks like examination, assignments, deadlines can make students put more efforts in their studies.

Out of the various dimensions of stress, physical stress (r = 0.61, p = 0.004), and social stress (r = 0.71, p = 0.018) were significantly positively correlated with academic achievement. This can be an indication that students who feel the academic pressure in the form of workload, time management, or social pressure can deflect the pressures to better academic results. Also, the aggregate effect of academic self-efficacy and workload stress (r = 0.49, p = 0.035) also proposed the positive relationship with the academic achievement indicating that students who believe in their possibilities to cope with academic workload are more likely to gain higher results. These results confirm the fact that stress does not necessarily have a bad impact instead moderate and manageable stress can serve as a motivating power to academic success.

The outcome of RQ2 tested the correlation between self-confidence and academic performance. General self-confidence was observed to have a low positive relation with academic achievement (r = 0.449, p = 0.038), thus showing that students who have greater levels of confidence have a slight higher possibility of achievement in academics. The results, however, also showed that various aspects of self-confidence have dissimilar impacts on studying success. As an example, academic achievement was strongly and positively correlated with self-confidence to ask questions in class (r = 0.814, p = 0.012). This implies that those students who actively discuss in the classes, explain their questions, and are

involved in learning activities have a higher chance of obtaining improved academic outcomes.

In a similar vein, the academic achievement was positively associated with self-confidence to work independently (r = 0.563, p = 0.029). This means that those students, who manage to control their learning process and do most of the tasks without the excessive support of the external factors, are more likely to demonstrate a better academic performance. Conversely, other dimensions of self-confidence like confidence in exams, class attendance and achieving goals had insignificant relationships with academic performance. This implies that not every kind of self-confidence is directly correlated with academic performance, and particular academic behaviors like active inquiry and independent study are even more important in academic performance.

RQ3 findings included the investigation of the connection between academic stress with self-confidence. The findings showed that there is a moderate positive correlation between academic stress and overall self-confidence (r = 0.705, p = 0.019). This implies that, students who are subjected to academic pressure could be able to build profound confidence since they learn how to cope with academic challenges. In addition, there were moderate to high positive correlations between self-confidence with regard to class participation and handling independent work and academic stress (r = 0.7180.732).

It is quite interesting to note that self-confidence to ask question (r = 0.798, p = 0.013) and self-confidence to achieve goals (r = 0.762, p = 0.015) had positive correlations with academic stress. Such results suggest that students with moderate academic stress levels can be more motivated to take an active part in the learning process and learn to feel confident to reach their academic objectives. Thus, stress, when it is kept to the controllable level, can also be the contributing factor to self-confidence and proactive behavior in the academic context.

In general, the study findings indicate that academic stress, self-confidence, and academic achievement are the three interrelated variables. The moderation of stress level seems to be a motivating factor and interest, and certain types of self-confidence, especially those associated with questioning, independent work, and goal achievement, can be relevant in facilitating the academic success of students.

Conclusion

The current research explored the connection between academic stress, self-confidence and academic achievement amongst students. As it was found out, academic stress has a positive relationship with academic achievement, which means that a moderate amount of stress is a motivating factor that prompts students to work harder and have better academic results. Different aspects of stress such as emotional, physical and social stress were positively correlated to academic performance indicating that academic pressures and expectations can arouse effort and productivity of students.

The findings also revealed that self confidence is positively related to academic performance, even though the relationship differs in various dimensions of confidence. To be more precise, self-confidence in posing questions and working alone proved to be the important factors in academic achievements of students. These results indicate the need to engage students to participate actively in classroom discussions and impart the skill of independent learning.

In addition, the research established that academic stress has a positive relationship with self-confidence. Students who have moderate degrees of academic stress grow more confident in their capabilities of engaging in classroom, posing questions, working alone, and attaining

their educational objectives. This means that stress in the right hands can lead to personal development and study as opposed to education.

Conclusively, the study argues that balanced academic stress and high self-confidence are significant factors that enhance the academic performance of students. The educational institutions and teachers should then aim at teaching students how to overcome academic stress and also develop self-confidence by providing them with supportive learning conditions, active engagement and independent learning opportunities. These interventions can contribute to the motivation, interest, and general achievement of students.

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