Academic Stress in High-Achieving Students: When Success Becomes a Source of Anxiety

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***Abstract*—The study explores the relationship between performance pressure and academic stress among the high performing students with emphasis on the contributing elements that cause the achievement related distress. The respondents of the study are students of higher secondary schools and colleges within urban India. The sample size of the study is 150 respondents whose data is obtained using a mixed-method approach and a structured questionnaire. Quantitative analysis is done in MS Excel and SPSS 27 where mean, standard deviation, correlation and regression analysis are applied. The results indicates that performance pressure and academic stress are positively and significantly correlated ($r = 0.252$, $p < 0.01$), which proves that performance expectations are higher, and the debt level is higher. The regression analysis indicates that the contributing factors explain 30% ($R2 = 0.300$) of the variation in achievement-related distress and thus they have a strong predictive ability. The analysis puts considerable emphasis on the contradiction of high motivation and high ambition, which are the determinants of success, turning into the cause of anxiety and emotional stress. It recommends educational, parental and a policy response to ensure the achievement is balanced with mental health.**

***Index Terms*—Academic Stress, Performance Pressure, Achievement Distress, High-Achieving Students, Emotional Well-being**

I. INTRODUCTION

Academic success has traditionally been regarded as a symbol of intelligence, diligence, and future potential. Under the success of the students who perform well, however, is a looming psychological pressure academic stress. In a highly competitive educational environment, students have been compelled to excel immensely to the extent that the self is equated to grades and appreciation (Von Stumm, et al., 2011). Performance pressure is a significant factor contributing to academic stress in the high-achieving students, and it is an intricate meta-phenomenon as it includes parental, teacher, peer, and societal expectations. These high-achieving students often learn to feel valuable only if they achieve success (North, 2015). The requirement to remain at the top of performance creates a vicious cycle of self-surveillance to perfection, an apprehension of failure and perfectionism. Even the little obstacles trigger the experience of inadequacy, self-doubt, or guilt. Such psychological pressure is in most instances worsened by the growing competitiveness of the education systems, standardized tests and entry criteria to the top institutions. Consequently, the quest to achieve excellence is equated with constant stress levels, night less days, and deteriorating mental health (McCabe-Bennett et al., 2014).

Underlying achievement-related distress is the fact that the very assets that drive high achievers - motivation, ambition, and persistence- are the same that expose them to the state of burnout and anxiety. These students are not always tolerant of errors or mediocrity and have a high standard of perfection and success. The need to excel may make creativity, intrinsic motivation and fun in studying unattainable (Mrig, & Sanaghan, 2017). Rather than being proud of what they are able to achieve, the students start developing fear - of not doing it right, not impressing the person or group, of losing power. As a result, success no longer brings fulfillment, it is also an emotional trap that destroys self-esteem and psychological strength in the long run (Khera, 2018).

The social and family context is important in enhancing this stress or in reducing it. Academic excellence has been viewed as the major path towards social mobility and family pride in most societies

especially in Asia and other cultures that have high achievement levels. Parents, even with the best intentions, have made expectations that are too high and thus conveyed an unintentional message of conditional love, i.e. loving someone and being proud is conditional based on what students achieve in school. Likewise, this pressure can be intensified by schools and teachers who can only reward the best students and equate performance with discipline or righteousness (Marginson, 2018). Peer comparison and social media intensify them further because students are always comparing themselves with the publicized success of others and this causes feelings of anxiety and fear of being left out (Nesi, & Prinstein, 2015).

Academic stress has long-term effects, which pass not only on emotional distress but on cognitive functions and well-being. The long-term effects of anxiety harm concentration, memory and decision-making which are ironic because it harms the very academic achievements that students work hard to uphold (Clabaugh, et al., 2021). Physical symptoms that include headaches, fatigue, insomnia, and weakening immunity are common and psychological symptoms that include depression, withdrawal of social interaction, and in extreme cases, suicidal ideation. The studies point out that excessive focus on achievement may result in a lower level of life satisfaction and lack of interest in learning. Rather than creating the balanced identity encompassing the social, emotional, and creative development, high-achieving students can build disjointed sense of self based on solely achievement (Lee, & Giuliani, 2019).

Academic stress in high-achieving students needs to be addressed at a multilevel, which involves educators, parents, and policymakers. Emotional literacy, mindfulness classes, and counseling sessions should be of high priority in schools to help students to handle pressure and redefine success (Högberg, 2024). The systems of assessment must become less rote performance and more holistic development through encouragement of curiosity, teamwork, and resilience. Parents must encourage unconditional support and realistic expectations because they should understand that learning is a process and not a race. Even the policymakers need to put into consideration the psychological prices of competitive education models and provide reforms that foster balance, flexibility, and well-being of the students as the fundamental education objectives (Suizzo, et al.,2008).

The study aim is to investigate the connection between performance pressure and stress related to academics in high-performing students while establishing the main contributors to achievement distress. It also investigates how parents, teachers, and institutions expectations (external and internal perfectionism) affect students' emotional and wellness. It adds to the literature by providing empirical evidence that performance pressure, as an antecedent of academic distress has a significant effect on academic distress and highlights the double bind of excellent performance resulting in anxiety.

The study is structured into six sections. Section 1 covers the introduction of the study. Section 2 of the study includes a literature review. Section 3 investigates research methodology. Section 4 offers discussion of the results obtained. Section 5 offers a thorough discussion. Finally, Section 6 provides conclusions, recommendations, limitations, and future scope. The references are provided at the end.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Kaur, A. (2025) studied the emotional experiences of high achieving students who were facing anxiety. In specific, Kaur examined emotional distress that arises from academic stress and the associated psychological well-being of students. The study justifies a phenomenological perspective, following a semi-structured approach to interviews, with thematic analysis to capture the participants lived experiences. The study indicates that students who are high achievers often mask their anxiety symptoms behind the facade of achievement, and students are undiagnosed and undertreated as a result.

Lim, H. S. (2025) examined the basic characteristics of hagwon culture including its integration into the lives of the everyday student, financial commitment, and academic assistance as well as test preparation. A comparative survey with similar systems in Japan and China highlights the unique nature of education in Korea. The study suggested policy changes including improving public education, supporting comprehensive forms of learning, and addressing socio-economic factors to reduce reliance on private academy schooling, and build a more equitable and balanced education system.

Cortina, P. C. (2025) investigated the matter of academic anxiety and its implications for the mental health of young people and called for more investigations into the specific identifiable factors that would eventually contribute to greater understanding, and therefore better practices for addressing this critical need. The outcomes endorse a requirement for schools to rely more heavily on instructional approaches that emphasize a holistic view of education and curricular designed to equally value both social and emotional health of students and the academic success.

Željeznov_Seničar, & Kukanja Gabrijelčič, (2025) examined the experiences of students with respect to emotions associated with success, which are on a positive-negative and pleasure-anxiety continuum, as well as students' general feelings towards failure, which often include annoyance and self-blame. This illustrates the stochasticity of social interactions that occur in educational settings. It is important for educators to understand and be aware of these social interactions if they would like to develop classrooms that are socially and emotionally supportive, inclusive, and engaging, in order for students to feel success both socially-emotionally and academically, including gifted learners.

Chung, J. H., & Park, Y. S. (2024) examined the complexity of academic stress and mental health in South Korean high school students using a participant-centered design that included qualitative and quantitative data. Their analysis classified students into stress profiles that indicated individual students experienced different levels of stress & several predictors of stress. The variables this study encompassed were academic stress, academic health outcomes and results of subgroup analysis of academic stress.

Roy, A. (2023) examined the effects of stress and anxiety on achievement motivation levels. The data revealed that students with a high and medium level of stress typically had low success motivation. Further, students with a low level of motivation had low levels of anxiety. No relationship was found between anxiety and motivation, while student stress significantly impacted achievement motivation. The results also showed that stress had a strong negative relationship with academic motivation but that students, who identified as male, reported greater levels of stress than those who were female, and those who identified as female reported greater levels of anxiety than those who identified as male.

Boyle, J. (2020) revealed students cited the demands of upper-level (IB, AP, and Honors) courses, extracurricular involvement, and course preparation as sources of stress. Workload, exam anxiety, inconsistent expectations, and pressure to meet course and individual performance standards were identified as academic stresses for participants. Anxieties levels rose due to engaging in social activities, maintaining friendships with classmates, using social media, and participating in extracurriculars. Participants also mentioned stress-reduction activities, support services, and time and curriculum management as ways that high-achieving students deal with social and academic pressures.

2.1 Research Gap

The literature review shows that there have been many studies on academic stress, anxiety, and performance among high-achieving students. However, most published studies have either examined the emotional outcomes or cultural influences on academic stress independently and have not examined performance pressure, or other influencing factors, that contribute to achievement-related distress. In addition, evidence examining achievement-related stress in India has been minimal across the life span, especially among adolescents and young adults in urban educational contexts. This study therefore, presents a significant research gap by examining the multidimensional relationship among performance pressure, stress, and achievement-related stress in India.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study utilizes a mixed method approach, drawing on both quantitative and qualitative methodologies, to enable a complete analysis. The study is set in urban India in higher secondary schools and colleges and identifies high-achieving students as the unit of analysis. This study relies on a descriptive and exploratory method to examine the relationship between performance pressure and academic stress. The data sources include primary and secondary data. A purposive sample of 150 respondents was selected. The primary research instrument is a structured questionnaire. The independent variables are performance pressure and associated variables with

performance pressure. The dependent variables are academic stress and academic distress relating to achievement. The data is analyzed in MS Excel and SPSS software for objective interpretation, employing appropriate statistical techniques (mean, standard deviations, and correlation and regression analysis) to verify findings.

IV. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics

Sr. No.	Demographic Variables	Characteristics	N	%
1	Age	15-17 years	46	30.70%
		18-20 years	39	26.00%
		21-23 years	35	23.30%
		Above 23 years	30	20.00%
2	Gender	Female	65	43.30%
		Male	85	56.70%
3	Academic Level	Higher Secondary	51	34.00%
		Postgraduate	39	26.00%
		Undergraduate	60	40.00%
4	Type of Institution	Autonomous Institution	46	30.70%
		Private Institution	47	31.30%
		Public Institution	57	38.00%
5	Family Background	Family Income Level	55	36.70%
		Parental Education	56	37.30%
		Parental Occupation	39	26.00%

The demographic profile of respondents suggests a varied and balanced sample in all dimensions. Most respondents are 15-17 years of age (30.7%), followed by the age of 18-20 (26%), the age group of 21-23 (23.3%), and those above 23 years (20%), which demonstrates that the majority of respondents are adolescents and/or young adults. In terms of gender, male respondents (56.7%) are slightly a above female respondent (43.3%), which indicates a moderate balance in gender. Regarding academic level, respondents at the undergraduate level were the greatest (40%) followed by respondents at the higher secondary (34%) and postgraduate levels (26%), which would signal that most respondents are from early in their higher educational experience. Regarding institution, respondents were well represented by public institutions (38%), but private (31.3%) and autonomous institutions were also nearly equally represented (30.7%). In terms of family background, the representations of parental education (37.3%) and family income level (36.7%) are very closely represented in terms of proportions, while parental occupation (26%) was less well represented. Clearly, the demographic data suggests a well-rounded and diverse sample of respondents to inform the analysis.

Objective 1: To examine the link between performance pressure and stress among high-achieving students.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive Statistics			
	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Performance pressure	10.9533	2.59410	150
Academic Stress	9.4267	3.01973	150

The descriptive statistics indicate the mean performance pressure score for the 150 participants was 10.95 (SD = 2.59). This indicates the participants, on average, experience a greater than moderate amount of performance pressure, and has moderate variability of performance pressure among participants. The mean academic stress was 9.43 (SD = 3.02) indicating that academic stress was also considerable and slightly less than performance pressure. The standard deviation of academic stress (3.02) was greater than the performance pressure (2.59), indicating academic stress had greater

variability among students. An increased variability in academic stress may reflect a difference in academic coping, academic expectations, or simply a factor of individual circumstance. Overall, the data indicates performance pressure is an important component of academic stress for students in this study.

Table 3: Correlation

Correlations			
		Performance pressure	Academic Stress
Performance pressure	Pearson Correlation	1	.252**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.002
	N	150	150
Academic Stress	Pearson Correlation	.252**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.002	
	N	150	150
**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).			

The correlation table indicates a statistically significant link existing between performance pressure and academic stress in a positive direction. The Pearson correlation coefficient (r = 0.252) suggests there is a small positive correlation, that is, academic stress increases with performance pressure. Furthermore, the correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed), meaning correlation is very unlikely to occur by chance (p = 0.002, less than .01 level).

Objective 2: To explore key factors contributing to achievement-related distress in high performers.

Table 4: Model Summary

Model Summary				
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.547[a]	.300	.295	1.92537
a. Predictors: (Constant), Contributing Factor				

The model summary indicates that there is a fairly positive correlation coefficient R = 0.547, suggesting a positive relationship between the dependent variable and the independent variable Contributing Factor. The model's contributing factor accounts for approximately 30% of the change in the dependent variable demonstrated in the R Squared value of 0.300. The Adjusted R Square of 0.295 indicates the model is a good fit for the data, given the sample size and the number of predictors, and does not lose explanatory power. The Standard Error of the Estimate of 1.92537 indicates the model predictions are quite accurate, as it indicates the average deviation of the observed values from predicted values. Overall, the results indicate the dependent variable is significantly and meaningfully related to, and helps to explain, the contributing factor.

Table 5: ANOVA

ANOVA[a]						
Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	234.690	1	234.690	63.309	.000[b]
	Residual	548.643	148	3.707		
	Total	783.333	149			
a. Dependent Variable: Achievement-Related Distress						
b. Predictors: (Constant), Contributing Factor						

A regression analysis that yielded significant results is found to predict Achievement Related Distress from the Contributing Factor as defined in the ANOVA table. The contributing Factor does account for a significant portion of the variance explained in achievement-related distress as noted in the regression sum of squares (234.690) as compared to corresponding sum of squares residual (548.643). There was a strongly significant linear relationship noted between the Contributing Factor and achievement-related distress denoted by level of significance (p = .05) (Sig. = 0.000) and F-value of 63.309. The contributions were significant significance as related to how this contributed to feelings of achievement-related distress and the various states of reduced, moderate, and severe states of achievement-related distress.

Table 6: Coefficients

Coefficients[a]						
Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	4.590	.657		6.986	.000
	Contributing Factor	.490	.062	.547	7.957	.000
a. Dependent Variable: Achievement-Related Distress						

According to the regression analysis, the contribution variable reduces achievement-related stress significantly. The unstandardized coefficient (B = 0.490) indicates that, everything else being equal, as the contribution variable increases by one unit, achievement-related stress increases by 0.490 units. The standardized coefficient (Beta = 0.547) demonstrates a relatively significant positive relationship between the two variables. This relationship is supported by a t-value of 7.957 and Sig. value of 0.000 at the 0.05 level of significance. When the contributing factor is zero, the projected amount of achievement-related discomfort is 4.590, a constant. Overall, the results demonstrate that contributing factors are a strong and significant predictor of achievement-related distress among respondents.

V. DISCUSSION

The study results of the current study also indicate that there is a strong and positive correlation between performance pressure and academic stress among high-achieving students. The descriptive statistics indicate that performance pressure (mean = 10.95) and academic stress (mean = 9.43) have a high and slightly lower mean respectively. This implies that students are always under high stress to perform, but the level of stress is moderately different among the students, based on coping mechanisms, environmental conditions and amongst the students in terms of resilience (Yasin, M. A. S. M., & Dzulkifli, M. A. 2011). The correlation of the two variables ($r = 0.252$, $p < 0.01$) also supports the above arguments by confirming that the higher the pressure to perform is put on a student, the higher the level of academic stress a student experiences (Prabu, P. S. 2015). It is in line with the study by (Boyle, J. 2020), who identified that high-achieving students often submit stress to workload, expectations around exams and extracurricular demands, which all contribute to anxiety and emotional burnout. Furthermore, the findings of regression indicate that contributory factors are an important predictor of achievement related distress and this accounts 30 percent of variance ($R2 = 0.300$) in the dependent variable. (Kovács, K., et al.,2022). Equally, (Nandamuri, & Gowthami, 2011) determined that achievement motivation is negatively correlated with increased levels of stress, which in turn means that when students are placed under a lot of academic pressure, they become de-motivated and less satisfied in their studies.

Moreover, the statistically significant ANOVA value ($F = 63.309$, $p < 0.001$) adds to the validity of the regression model which, in turn, proves that the contributing factors have a significant impact on academic distress. These results are similar to (Hosseinkhani, Z., et al.,2020), who indicated that academic stress is multidimensional and tightly connected with mental health outcomes in students. The findings of the current study suggest that psychological cost of high-performance standards is not limited to the cognitive exhaustion but also to the emotional one, consistent with (Tyson, D. F., et al.,2009) who spoke of the emotional duality of achievement, starting with the feeling of pride and ending with anxiety among talented learners.

On the whole, the results suggest the intrinsic contradiction in the situation when achievement-related distress takes place and, therefore, an event that could serve as a motivating factor simultaneously triggers anxiety. Internalized and unrealistic standards of perfectionism are usually seen as the motivation drive and persistence of high achievers that transform learning stress into a high-stakes activity (Bong, M., et al.,2014). The data of the connection that the motivation toward performance and frustration of emotional vulnerability clarifies the need to have a

more structural method of educational transformation where emotional intelligence, self-compassion, and intrinsic motivation are founded just as significantly as academic cognitive success or achievement (Estrada, M., et al.,2021). Consequently, in line with (Yurayat, et al.,2025) recommendations, it is urgent that tertiary institutions should offer mental health education to learners as well as mindfulness training through the supportive and counseling-oriented system. Thus, the subsequent policies need to aim to contextualize the success not only in quantitative terms but in a balanced approach to success that would promote learning in students and focus on their mental health and well-being.

VI. CONCLUSION

The study indicates that academic pressure among high performing students is an intricate fact, most of which is associated with meeting high expectations because students report that their parents place expectations on them, institutions do the same and students are under competition. These results identified a positive strong relationship of pressure to perform where the higher the pressure of performing the more distressing and harmful to emotional and mental health the external measures of performance become. The regression analysis also revealed that the contributing factors forecast the distress in relation to achievement of a student by about 30 percent, which is evidence of the high predictive ability of the contributing factors. Actually, the stress to succeed is two-sided since, on the one hand, motivation and ambition can enhance the perception of identity and accomplishment in a learner, whereas on the other hand, they can also expose a student to sexual burnout, anxiety, and self-doubt. This study highlights the ironical reality of success, when purpose is given to the performance and not the internally-validated validation, motivation is a cause of anxiety. Emotional literacy, mindfulness, and mental health deprivation in schools are also recommended to be addressed to facilitate resiliency and redefine success as an achievement and mental well-being balance.

The study has significant implications to teachers, policymakers, and parents with regard to recognizing the pressing necessity of all three related to academic achievement and emotional and psychological stability of students. Schools should establish mental health awareness programs, counselor services and stress management programs that provide support and assistance to students to handle the academic performance pressure. Parents should help students appreciate the process of improvement, developing and working hard on the task instead of concentrating on the end of school result. Although the 150 respondents were adequate, the authors could use a bigger sample in the future. In future research, the researcher may increase the sample to encompass geographic areas (rural) or other geographic settings that would also project results to broad populations, or could aid in constructing potential sceneries to test interventions that would investigate probable cause and effect of performance pressure, as compared to psychological outcomes. Future research might also focus on the role of parenting styles, digital learning environments, or resilience-building programs in alleviating academic stress in order to benefit high-yield achievement students.

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