Intolerance Of Uncertainty, Perceived Social Support and Academic Self-Handicapping Among High School Students In Andhra Pradesh

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***Abstract*—Students sometimes protect their self-worth by building excuses in advance of an exam, a pattern called academic self-handicapping. This study asked whether intolerance of uncertainty (IU) and perceived social support (PSS) are linked to self-handicapping among high school students in Andhra Pradesh, and whether support changes the strength of the link between IU and self-handicapping. A cross-sectional correlational design was used with 217 students Classes 8-12, aged 14-19 from private and corporate institutions, chosen through purposive sampling. They completed the IUS-12, the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support and the Academic Self-Handicapping Scale. Data were analysed with descriptive statistics, Cronbach's alpha, Pearson correlation, independent-samples t-tests and moderated regression. IU was unrelated to self-handicapping (r = .062, p = .365) and to support (r = -.034, p = .623). Support, in contrast, showed a small negative relationship with self-handicapping (r = -.177, p = .009). Boys and girls did not differ, the rural–urban gap stayed just short of significance (p = .052), and corporate-institution students scored higher than private-institution students (p = .044). Support did not moderate the IU-self-handicapping link (ΔR^2 = .001, p = .731). Feeling supported appears to matter in a direct, additive way. The IU measure had low reliability in this sample, so conclusions about IU are tentative.**

***Index Terms*—academic self-handicapping, adolescents, high school students, intolerance of uncertainty, moderation analysis, perceived social support**

I. INTRODUCTION

Between Classes 8 and 12, an Indian student is asked to make choices that many adults would find heavy, which stream to take after Class 10, whether to attempt a national entrance test, and how much of the day to hand over to coaching. None of these choices comes with a guaranteed result. In Andhra Pradesh the pressure is especially visible, because board examinations sit alongside competitive tests such as EAMCET, NEET and JEE MAINS, and many students' studies in corporate junior colleges built around test performance. Underneath the timetable, the real demand on these adolescents is to keep working while the outcome, and even the worth of their effort, stays unknown.

Students differ in how they carry that unknown. Some treat it as an ordinary feature of school life. Others find not-knowing distressing in itself. This second tendency is called intolerance of uncertainty (IU): a stable disposition to react with worry, discomfort or avoidance when outcomes are unclear (Buhr & Dugas, 2002; Carleton et al., 2007). Dugas et al. (2004) describe it as a bias in appraisal, where ambiguity itself is read as danger, and Bredemeier and Berenbaum (2008) found that people who are high in IU overestimate both how likely and how serious a bad outcome is. Carleton et al. (2012) separate a prospective form anxious anticipation and the need to know in advance from an inhibitory form being unable to act while things are unresolved. IU is not fixed: in a longitudinal sample, adolescents whose IU rose over time were considerably more likely to develop anxiety and depression (Ye et al., 2026), and an 18-lesson school programme in Australia lowered IU at post-test, although the gain faded at follow-up (Einstein et al., 2024).

Academic self-handicapping is one way a student may respond when failure feels close. The student creates, or simply claims, an obstacle, such as leaving revision to the last night, spending time with friends before a

test, or announcing that they are unwell, so that a poor result can be blamed on the obstacle and not on ability (Berglas & Jones, 1978). Urdan and Midgley (2001) separate behavioural handicaps, which are real choices that lower the chance of doing well, from claimed handicaps, which are statements made to others. The strategy protects self-esteem briefly but tends to cost students in well-being, motivation and results over time (Gadbois & Sturgeon, 2011; Schwinger et al., 2022).

Perceived social support (PSS) is the sense that help and care are available from people around us. It is the perceived availability, more than the objective presence, of support that seems to matter for adjustment (Cutrona & Russell, 1990; Tardy, 1985). The Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (Zimet et al., 1988) treats support as coming from three sources which are family, friends and a significant other. Two ideas link the three variables. Appraisal theory (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) suggests that a student high in IU is more likely to read an uncertain academic outcome as a threat, which may encourage self-protective excuses. The stress-buffering view (Cohen & Wills, 1985) suggests that supportive people leave the uncertain situation unchanged but make it feel less threatening. If both are right, the pull from IU towards self-handicapping should be weaker in well-supported students.

Studies that put all three variables in one model are scarce, especially for Indian secondary school students. The present study therefore examined (a) the relationships among IU, PSS and self-handicapping, (b) differences in self-handicapping by gender, area of residence and type of institution, and (c) whether PSS moderates the IU-self-handicapping relationship among high school students in Andhra Pradesh.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A. Intolerance of uncertainty

The English version of the Intolerance of Uncertainty Scale showed strong consistency and validity and helped establish IU as a measurable disposition distinct from worry (Buhr & Dugas, 2002). Among Dutch secondary school students, IU was positively linked to worry, social anxiety and depressive symptoms (Boelen et al., 2010). A review of neuroimaging and psychophysiological work connected IU to heightened reactivity in the anterior insula and amygdala and to weaker safety learning, offering a biological reason why ambiguity is experienced as threatening (Tanovic et al., 2018). In academic settings, IU has been shown to mediate between perfectionism and procrastination in Iranian master's students (Mansouri et al., 2022), and hardiness was negatively related to IU in more than 1,200 Turkish undergraduates (Oral & Karakurt, 2022). The closest test of the path examined here comes from American university students, in whom IU raised cognitive test anxiety, which in turn increased self-handicapping and lowered grade point average (Cassady et al., 2024).

B. Perceived social support

Among 280 Indian adolescents, those with higher PSS reported lower academic stress on every sub-dimension measured (Sharma & Tanmeet, 2012). Italian high school students' emotional intelligence helped explain their PSS beyond personality (Di Fabio & Kenny, 2012), and Indian rural and urban adolescents differed in perceived support (Nautiyal et al., 2017). Parent and teacher support was linked to less academic procrastination and better well-being among adolescents (Zheng et al., 2023). Most relevant to the present model, Du and Lyu (2021) found that support moderated how future uncertainty related to IU in Chinese middle-school students, and Beck and Daniels (2023) found IU and low support each predicted distress in healthcare workers. The MSPSS has been validated for Indian samples (Sanjeev et al., 2021) and for early adolescents in Darjeeling, although measurement invariance across gender was only partly supported (Cherewick et al., 2025).

C. Academic self-handicapping

Students with stronger self-handicapping tendencies tend to report lower self-concept clarity, more test anxiety and weaker results (Gadbois & Sturgeon, 2011). A meta-analysis identified performance-avoidance goals, low self-esteem and fear of failure as the most consistent antecedents (Schwinger et al., 2022). Among Turkish students, anxiety sensitivity, perceived social support, achievement and narcissistic traits jointly explained self-handicapping (Kalyon et al., 2016), and lower family support predicted more self-handicapping among undergraduates (Robinson et al., 2023). Perfectionism (Alodat et al., 2020), low self-control (Melhem, 2022) and low academic

buoyancy (Aloka et al., 2022) have also been related to it. Evidence on gender is mixed: Cocoradă (2011) reported more self-handicapping in adolescent boys, while Robinson et al. (2023) found no gender link. In India, Gupta and Geetika (2020) developed a scale with behavioural and claimed dimensions, Babu and Selvamari (2020) linked weaker academic self-concept to more self-handicapping in Kerala, and Suhara (2025) found that higher competence and a better emotional climate predicted less self-handicapping in a large Kerala sample.

D. Research gap

Most of this work involved university students or adults, and adolescent studies usually examined two of the three constructs at a time. No study located in this review tested IU, PSS and academic self-handicapping together in Andhra Pradesh, a setting where examination pressure is unusually intense. The present study addresses that gap.

E. Objectives and hypotheses

The objectives were to examine the relationships among IU, PSS and academic self-handicapping; to compare self-handicapping across gender, area of residence and type of institution; and to test whether PSS moderates the IU-self-handicapping relationship.

The following null hypotheses were tested:

- H01: IU is not significantly related to academic self-handicapping.
- H02: PSS is not significantly related to academic self-handicapping.
- H03: IU is not significantly related to PSS.
- H04-H06: Academic self-handicapping does not differ by gender (H04), area of residence (H05) or type of institution (H06).
- H07: PSS does not significantly moderate the relationship between IU and academic self-handicapping.

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Design

The study followed a quantitative, non-experimental, cross-sectional design that was correlational and comparative. Nothing was manipulated; students reported on themselves once, and scores were then related to one another and compared across groups. The moderation model was a simple interaction model equivalent to Model 1 of Hayes's (2022) PROCESS framework, with IU as the predictor (X), PSS as the moderator (W) and academic self-handicapping as the outcome (Y): $Y = b_0 + b_1X + b_2W + b_3(X \times W) + e$. H07 is supported only if b_3 differs from zero.

B. Participants

Participants were 217 students of Classes 8-12, aged 14-19 years (M = 16.38, SD = 1.36), from private and corporate institutions in Andhra Pradesh. Purposive sampling was used so that institution type, locality and family type were deliberately represented (Etikan et al., 2016). There were 92 boys (42.4%) and 125 girls (57.6%); 109 rural and 108 urban students; 143 students from private and 74 from corporate institutions; and 127 from nuclear and 90 from joint families. Class 12 formed the largest group (39.2%), followed by Class 11 (22.6%), Class 10 (18.4%), Class 8 (12.0%) and Class 9 (7.8%). Students with a diagnosed psychiatric or neurological condition, and those who completed fewer than 80% of the items, were excluded.

C. Instruments

Socio-demographic sheet. Age, class, gender, area of residence, family type and type of institution.

Intolerance of Uncertainty Scale–12 (IUS-12; Carleton et al., 2007). Twelve items rated from 1 (not at all characteristic of me) to 5 (entirely characteristic of me). All items are scored in the same direction and summed (range 12–60); higher scores mean greater IU. The total score was used, as recommended by Hale et al. (2016).

Academic Self-Handicapping Scale (ASHS; Babu & Selvamari, 2020). A 20-item scale for Indian secondary school students rated from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Items are summed (range 20–100); higher scores indicate more self-handicapping.

Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS; Zimet et al., 1988). Twelve items rated from 1 (very strongly disagree) to 7 (very strongly agree) covering family, friends and a significant other. Items were summed (range 12–84); higher scores mean greater perceived support. The scale has been validated in Indian samples (Sanjeev et al., 2021).

D. Procedure and ethics

Permission was obtained from the heads of the participating institutions, and ethical clearance was in place before data collection. Written parental or guardian consent was obtained for every participant under 18, along with each student's own written assent. Students were told that participation was voluntary, that they could stop at any time without consequence, and that their answers were confidential. Paper questionnaires were completed in class under the investigator's supervision in about 20-25 minutes. Forms were checked on collection, responses were entered item by item, and scale totals were computed according to each instrument's scoring key. Students who showed distress were to be referred to the school counsellor.

E. Data analysis

All analyses were run in IBM SPSS Statistics with two-tailed tests at α = .05. Data were screened for out-of-range and missing values none were found. Normality was judged from skewness and kurtosis, Cronbach's alpha was computed for each scale, Pearson correlations tested H01-H03, independent-samples t-tests tested H04-H06, and hierarchical moderated regression tested H07. Because an interaction term built from raw scores overlaps heavily with its components, the model was re-estimated with mean-centred predictors (Aiken & West, 1991; Hayes, 2022).

IV. RESULTS

A. Descriptive statistics and reliability

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics and reliability. Skewness and kurtosis for all three scales fell between -1 and +1, so parametric tests were appropriate. With no Indian adolescent norms available, scores were read against each scale's midpoint: IU sat at its midpoint (36), PSS was above its midpoint (48), and self-handicapping was slightly below its midpoint (60). Reliability was acceptable for the MSPSS (α = .803) and ASHS (α = .764) but low for the IUS-12 (α = .565); its subscales were weaker still (prospective α = .55, inhibitory α = .29). Hale et al. (2016) similarly found that the IUS-12 total score is reliable mainly through a general factor and advised against interpreting subscales. Any result involving IU should therefore be read cautiously.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics and Reliability of the Study Variables (N = 217)

Variable	Possible range	Observed range	M	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis	α
Intolerance of uncertainty	12-60	16-52	36.00	7.55	-.12	-.07	.565
Perceived social support	12-84	12-84	61.10	14.74	-.79	-.68	.803
Academic self-handicapping	20-100	27-82	56.69	12.40	-.23	-.68	.764

Note. α = Cronbach's alpha.

B. Relationships among the variables (H01- H03)

As Table 2 shows, only one of the three correlations was significant. PSS had a small negative relationship with self-handicapping, $r(215) = -.177$, $p = .009$, 95% CI [-.30, -.04], accounting for about 3% of the variance ($r^2 = .031$), so H02 was rejected. IU was not significantly related to self-handicapping, $r(215) = .062$, $p = .365$, 95% CI [-.07, .19], or to PSS, $r(215) = -.034$, $p = .623$, 95% CI [-.17, .10]; H01 and H03 were retained.

Correcting the IU-self-handicapping correlation for unreliability raised it only to about .09, which is still negligible.

Table 2: Pearson Correlations among the Study Variables (N = 217)

Variable	1	2	3
1. Intolerance of uncertainty	—		
2. Perceived social support	-.034	—	
3. Academic self-handicapping	.062	-.177	—

Note. p < .01 (two-tailed).

C. Group differences (H04-H06)

Levene's test was non-significant in all three comparisons, so equal-variance results are reported (Table 3). Boys and girls differed by about one point, which was neither significant nor meaningful (H04

retained). Rural students scored about three points higher than urban students, but the difference narrowly missed significance (p = .052) and its confidence interval only just included zero, so H05 was retained; the small effect (d = 0.27) is better treated as a tentative trend. Corporate-institution students scored about 3.6 points higher than private-institution students, $t(215) = -2.02$, p = .044, d = -0.29, and the Welch-corrected test agreed, $t(142.03) = -1.99$, p = .048. H06 was rejected, although the effect is small.

Table 3: Independent-Samples t-Tests for Academic Self-Handicapping

Comparison	Group	n	M	SD	t (df = 215)	p	Cohen's d
Gender	Male	92	56.07	12.18	- 0.64	.525	-0.09
	Female	125	57.15	12.59			
Area of residence	Rural	109	58.32	12.33	1.96	.052	0.27
	Urban	108	55.05	12.32			
Type of institution	Private	143	55.48	12.12	- 2.02	.044	-0.29
	Corporate	74	59.04	12.68			

Note. *$p < .05$ (two-tailed). Cohen's d is positive when the first group scored higher.*

D. Moderation analysis (H07)

With raw scores, the overall model was not significant, $F(3, 213) = 2.56$, p = .056, R^2 = .035, and the interaction term was far from significance (B = 0.002, p = .731). However, the product term was highly correlated with its component's variance inflation factors 15-32. The model was therefore re-estimated with mean-centred predictors (Table 4). The interaction test was unchanged and collinearity disappeared (VIF ≈ 1). Adding the interaction raised explained variance by only 0.1% (ΔR^2 = .001, p = .731; f^2 = .001), so H07 was retained. With predictors centred, PSS remained a significant direct predictor: at average IU, each one-point rise in support was associated with a 0.14-point drop in self-handicapping (p = .013).

Table 4: Hierarchical Moderated Regression with Mean-Centred Predictors

Step / Predictor	B	SE B	β	t	p	VIF
Step 1						
Intolerance of uncertainty (X)	0.092	0.110	.056	0.83	.406	1.00
Perceived social support (W)	-0.147	0.057	-.175	-2.60	.010	1.00
Step 2						
Intolerance of uncertainty (X)	0.089	0.111	.054	0.81	.421	1.01
Perceived social support (W)	-0.144	0.057	-.171	-2.51	.013	1.03
Interaction (X × W)	0.002	0.007	.021	0.34	.731	1.03

Note. Step 1: R^2 = .034, F (2, 214) = 3.80, p = .024. Step 2: R^2 = .035, ΔR^2 = .001, F change (1, 213) = 0.12, p = .731. Dependent variable: academic self-handicapping.

Conditional effects of IU on self-handicapping were non-significant at low (-1 *SD*; b = 0.055, p = .721), average (b = 0.089, p = .421) and high (+1 *SD*; b = 0.124, p = .391) levels of PSS, and the Johnson-Neyman procedure found no value of PSS within the observed range (12-84) at which the IU effect became significant.

A power estimate suggested that with 217 participants the interaction test could detect an effect of about f^2 = .04 with 80% power, far larger than the observed f^2 = .001.

V. DISCUSSION

Of the three psychological variables, perceived social support was the only one reliably linked to academic self-handicapping. Students who felt backed by family, friends and a special person reported fewer excuse-making behaviours. This agrees with Kalyon et al. (2016) and Robinson et al. (2023), and with evidence that parent and teacher support relates to less academic procrastination (Zheng et al., 2023). One reading is that a student who can count on others has less need for a ready-made excuse, because acceptance does not depend on the result. A correlation cannot confirm that explanation, and with only about 3% of variance explained, support is clearly one influence among many.

The lack of any link between IU and self-handicapping runs against the appraisal-based expectation. Several explanations are plausible. The relationship may be indirect: Cassady et al. (2024) found that IU worked through cognitive test anxiety, and a distant link in such a chain can be weak even if the chain is real. Work on adolescent IU has mostly concerned emotional outcomes such as worry and depression (Boelen et al., 2010), so IU may relate more to how students feel than to the excuses they use. In a school system where nearly, everyone faces the same examination pressure, individual differences in IU may explain little. The low reliability of the IUS-12 also adds measurement error, though the correction for unreliability suggests this alone cannot explain a correlation so small. IU and PSS were also unrelated, which treats them as separate predictors in line with Beck and Daniels (2023).

Support did not moderate the IU-self-handicapping relationship. Du and Lyu (2021) did find moderation by support in middle-school students, but their outcome was IU itself and not self-handicapping. A buffering effect needs something to buffer, and because IU was barely related to self-handicapping here, there was little for support to weaken. Support appears to relate to self-handicapping directly and additively, whatever the student's level of discomfort with uncertainty.

No gender difference emerged, consistent with Robinson et al. (2023) and unlike Cocoradă (2011) and Melhem (2022). Where boys and girls face the same high-stakes examinations, the pressures that lead to self-handicapping may be shared. Corporate-institution students scored higher than private-institution students, which fits the performance-centred culture of corporate junior colleges and the roles of fear of failure and performance-avoidance goals in self-handicapping (Schwinger et al., 2022; Urdan & Midgley, 2001). This result was only just significant, was one of three unadjusted comparisons, and the groups may differ in age, class or stream, so it should be seen as suggestive. The rural-urban trend may relate to differences in access to guidance and academic resources, but this study did not test that.

VI. IMPLICATIONS, LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

A. Implications

- Counsellors working with students who procrastinate or make excuses around exams could include a brief check of who the student feels able to turn to.
- Schools could build support into everyday structures, such as mentor teachers, class counsellors and peer-support groups, particularly for senior students.
- Parents can help by showing interest in the process of learning and answering a poor result with problem-solving instead of criticism, so that home does not feel conditional on marks.
- Corporate institutions could review practices that heighten fear of failure, such as constant public ranking, and place counselling within the regular timetable.

B. Limitations

The design was cross-sectional and correlational, so no causal direction can be inferred. All measures were self-reported and open to social desirability, especially for a behaviour students may not want to admit. Purposive sampling from one state limits generalisation.

The private and corporate groups were unequal in size (143 and 74), and the institution-type result was borderline and unadjusted for multiple tests. Students completed questionnaires in classrooms, where seating may have affected independence of responses. Finally, the IUS-12 had low internal consistency in this sample, so results involving IU are less secure.

C. Future Suggestions

Future work could use larger, randomly selected, multi-state samples; longitudinal or experimental designs to test whether increasing support lowers self-handicapping; indirect paths through test anxiety, fear of failure or performance-avoidance goals; separate analysis of family, friend and significant-other support, with teacher support as an additional source; a more reliable, culturally adapted IU measure for Indian adolescents; comparison of corporate, private, aided and government institutions with class and stream controlled; and mixed methods that capture students own explanations.

VII. CONCLUSION

In 217 high school students from Andhra Pradesh, higher perceived social support was modestly but reliably associated with lower academic self-handicapping, while intolerance of uncertainty was related to neither self-handicapping nor support. Support did not buffer the weak IU-self-handicapping link; it appeared to work directly. Self-handicapping did not differ by gender, differed slightly and not significantly by locality, and was higher in corporate than in private institutions. The buffering model that guided the study was therefore not supported, but the findings add evidence from an under-studied population that feeling supported goes with less self-protective excuse-making, and they point to the school and home environment as a practical place to act.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I Sincerely thank the heads of the participating institutions, the parents and guardians who gave consent, and the students who took part in this study.

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