

The Impact of Burnout and Exam Anxiety on the Academic Self-Efficacy of Competitive Exam Aspirants

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the study was to analyse the impact of burnout and exam anxiety on the academic self-efficacy of competitive exam aspirants. A sample size of 120 respondents was taken via purposive random sampling and the Burnout Assessment Tool (BAT, 2020), Test and Anxiety Measure (TEAM, by Byron D. Brooks) and General Academic Self-Efficacy Scale (GASE, 2018) were used for data collection. A multiple regression model was employed, and it was found that trait anxiety, state anxiety (factors of exam anxiety) and cognitive impairment (factor of burnout) predict Academic Self-Efficacy amongst competitive exam aspirants. While trait anxiety and cognitive impairment have a negative relationship with Academic Self-Efficacy, state anxiety has a positive relationship with Academic Self-Efficacy. Suggestions to help alleviate burnout and academic anxiety are also discussed.

Keywords: Exam Anxiety, Academic Self-Efficacy, Burnout, Competitive Exams, Aspirants, Regression Analysis

Competitive examinations in India

Attaining a degree associated with a respectable pay grade usually requires adolescents to successfully pass competitive entrance examinations for admission to universities offering higher education. These exams are not only highly competitive, but also require the students to perform extraordinarily to attain entry into the University. Take the example of CAT, the entrance examination required to pursue a Master of Business Administration (MBA) from a reputable university in India. More than 2.5 lakh aspirants registered for the exam in 2022, and more than 2.2 lakh appeared for the examination (Gupta, 2023). Such a high appearance rate begets strong competition. Naturally, the cutoffs in the top IIM's (Indian Institute of Management)—the dream universities of every aspirant—have cutoffs of about 98-100 percentile. With cut-throat competition, a large pool of applicants, and a minimal number of seats, scoring high on these exams and securing a seat in a college can be particularly arduous and can lead to a high level of stress amongst students. It is imperative that we understand factors that impact the aspirants and their performance on such vital examinations. A considerable amount of students appearing for competitive exams suffer from anxiety, depression, and stress (Pachole et al., 2023; Premkumar et al., 2022; Shrivastava & Rajan, 2019). While stress, anxiety and depression

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Received: January 26, 2024; Revision Received: June 10, 2024; Accepted: June 14, 2024

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are established factors that impact the academic performance of aspirants (Raman & Elakkiya, 2021), this study focuses on the impact of burnout and exam anxiety on the academic self-efficacy of competitive exam aspirants.

Academic Self-Efficacy (ASE)

Self-efficacy is an individual's belief in their own potential and abilities. The idea was first put out by Bandura (1994) and entails having faith in one's capacity to control their own behaviour, make a difference in the world, and stay motivated while working toward a goal. The belief that one would be able to accomplish a set of tasks allows an individual to perceive that *task* as a challenge to be completed, rather than a *threat* to be avoided. It gives the individual motivation to ensure that they fulfil and complete the challenge and makes them more confident of the approach they are adopting. It gives them a sense of accomplishment and fulfilment. A high sense of self-efficacy keeps an individual mindful and open to criticism and gives them the confidence to consider it constructive. Rather than shutting down or finding criticism offensive, a person with a strong sense of self-efficacy may make amends and improve his approach upon receiving criticism and feedback.

Academic self-efficacy (ASE) implies to this belief in terms of academic capabilities. ASE is strongly correlated with academic success and achievement (Ahmad & Safaria, 2013; Akomolafe et al., 2013; Honicke & Broadbent, 2016; Hwang et al., 2016; Galyon et al., 2011; Musa, 2020; Zajacova et al., 2005). Not only academic performance, but having a strong sense of ASE is also correlated with having better coping strategies to deal with stress, and better class engagement (Galyon et al., 2012; Khan, 2023). On the other hand, ASE is negatively associated with academic burnout (Coluccio et al., 2022; Zhou et al., 2022). Therefore, having a strong sense of ASE is pertinent for students appearing for competitive examinations.

Examination Anxiety

Anxiety is a feeling of worry, apprehension, fear, and inner turmoil. Symptoms may include palpitations, increased heart rate, racing thoughts or feelings of nervousness, panic, and fear. Exam anxiety or evaluation apprehension is the anxiety that students/aspirants face before appearing for an examination. Many competitive exam aspirants face exam anxiety (Hashmat et al., 2008; Khoshhal et al., 2017; Prasad et al., 2022). Exam anxiety, also referred to as evaluation apprehension, or test anxiety, is known to negatively influence academic performance (Adewuyi et al., 2012; Hunsley, 1985; Mirawdali et al., 2018).

Self-efficacy is a known predictor of test anxiety (Von der Embse et al., 2018). Although test anxiety may seem benign, it could lead to a multitude of distressing factors like low self-esteem, shattered confidence, degrading marks, inability to concentrate, lag in time management, lost motivation, other disorders like depression and attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder, difficulty recalling information, stress leading to burnout, and many more psychological disturbances. (Culler & Holahan, 1980; Kavakci et al., 2014; Kordzanganeh et al., 2021; Sarı et al., 2018)

Burnout

The term "burnout" refers to the wearing out of one's physical, emotional, or motivational reserves. It is the consequence of extended stress. The "General Adaptation Syndrome" (GAS model) by Selye (1951) explains burnout as the result of three stages of prolonged stress—resistance, exhaustion, and burnout.

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Academic stress constitutes as the majority source of stress for aspirants (Mann et al., 2021) and is negatively impacted by ASE (Yoon & Jung, 2014). Student burnout is often the result of being exposed to severe academic stress and an inability to cope with the amount of work being presented to them. Burnout may be caused due to unrealistic goals set up by the student, poor eating habits, negligence of health, absence of physical activity, procrastination, parental and peer pressure and an increasing pile of academic work. Burnout can negatively impact students and it is negatively correlated with self-efficacy and academic achievement (Madigan & Curran, 2021; Rahmati, 2015). Students suffering from burnout may start to feel detached from their studies, feel emotionally exhausted (Tomaschewski-Barlem et al., 2013), show depressive symptoms, decreased school engagement (Fiorilli et al., 2017; Ranasinghe et al., 2022) and behavioural changes (Tomaschewski-Barlem et al., 2014). A low level of burnout is correlated with a favourable disposition, participation in activities beyond school, and strong social support (Jacobs et al., 2003).

Aspirants tend to take on more workload than they can successfully complete. This leads to frustration, disappointment, and an inability to complete any work. However, a key to overcoming burnout can be proper time management (Bruce, 2009; Kordzanganeh et al., 2021; Layth et al., 2017). *Guided self-reflection* is one technique that helps increase self-efficacy and helps students overcome burnout (Kundu, 2019). Other techniques that can be used are further discussed towards the end of the paper.

METHOD

Sample

The sample consisted of 120 participants (males = 27.9%, females = 72.1%). The inclusion criteria stated that the participant must be preparing for and planning to give a competitive exam and must be able to read, write, and comprehend English. The participants participating in the study were appearing for the following competitive exams—CSE (Civil Services Examination), CAT (Common Admission Test), NEET (National Eligibility cum Entrance Test), CUET (Common University Entrance Test), NET JRF (National Eligibility Test for Junior Research Fellowship), GRE (Graduate Record Examination), GMAT (Graduate Management Admission Test), DU JAT (Delhi University Joint Admission Test for undergraduate courses), DUET (Delhi University Entrance Test), TISS NET (Tata Institute of Social Sciences National Entrance Test), CA (Chartered Accountant), JEE (Joint Entrance Examination)—with the maximum participants appearing for CAT and NEET (24.6%), followed by CUET (12.3%) and other examinations. The exclusion criteria stated that people who were not preparing for any competitive exam will not to be a part of the study. 29.5% of the sample were aspirants who were reappearing for their respective examinations. 46% of the sample resided in Delhi, 28% in Kota, and 25% in Noida.

Design

The aim of the study was to assess the impact of burnout and exam anxiety on the ASE of competitive exam aspirants residing in Delhi NCR, Kota, and Noida. It is hypothesized that factors of burnout and exam anxiety will predict ASE in competitive exam aspirants. The data were collected through purposive random sampling and analysed through SPSS. The research employed a multiple regression research design using the step-wise method.

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Instruments

Burnout was measured through the Burnout Assessment Tool (BAT) (Schaufeli et al., 2019). The BAT measures the core symptoms and the secondary symptoms experienced by an individual. It consists of five subscales—*exhaustion, mental distance, cognitive impairment, emotional impairment, and secondary distress symptoms*. The secondary distress symptoms subscale includes items focusing on psychological distress and psychosomatic complaints. The BAT has strong to outstanding internal consistency and test-retest reliability, but inter-rater reliability is weak to moderate, particularly for the subscales. Exam anxiety was measured through the Test and Examination Anxiety Measure (TEAM) (Brooks et al., 2015). TEAM is a self-report questionnaire constituting 26 items that gauges students' test-related anxiety behaviours. The TEAM has five subscales—state anxiety, exam distractibility, trait anxiety, worry, and rumination. On a 5-point likert-type scale, respondents scored their exam anxiety behaviours from 1 (uncharacteristic of me) to 5 (typical of me). The TEAM has concurrent validity and high reliability. ASE was assessed using the General Academic Self-Efficacy Scale (GASE) (Nielsen et al., 2018). GASE is a five-item self-report scale, which ranges from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The GASE has strong internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha = 0.81), and concurrent validity.

RESULTS

The study investigates whether burnout and exam anxiety impact the ASE of competitive exam aspirants. In order to find any outliers in the data, a conventional residual analysis was conducted. Results indicated that participant number 48 needed to be eliminated. The sample size was therefore decreased to 120 from the original 121. Multicollinearity was not a problem, according to tests to determine if the data matched the collinearity assumption (trait anxiety, tolerance = .94, VIF = 1.062; state anxiety, tolerance = .91, VIF = 1.01; cognitive impairment, tolerance = .94, VIF = 1.061). The data (Durbin-Watson value 1.942) confirmed the premise of independent errors. The statistics also confirmed that the premise of non-zero variances was justified.

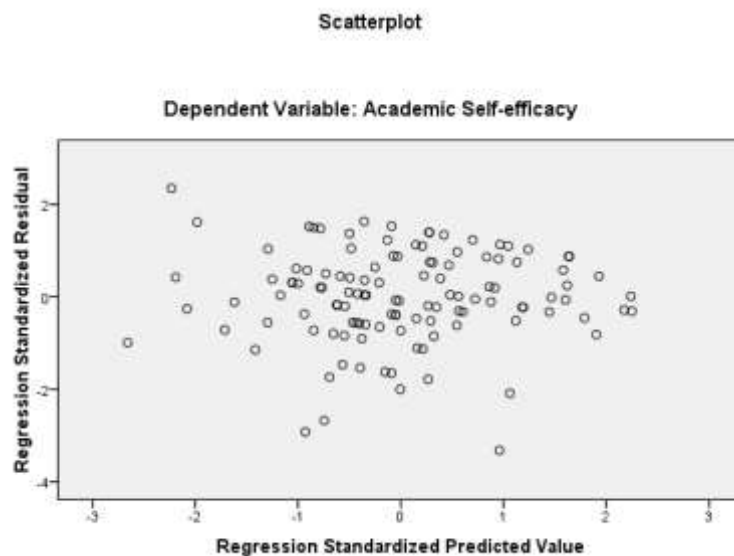


Figure 1: The scatterplot of standardised residuals demonstrates that the data were consistent with the assumptions of linearity and homogeneity of variance.

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Table 1 – Descriptive Statistics of burnout, academic anxiety, academic self-efficacy

Variable	Mean	SD
Burnout	34.80	7.95
Exam Anxiety	76.44	10.83
Academic Self-efficacy	20.29	3.32

Table 1 reports the mean and SD of burnout, exam anxiety and ASE. A high score on these subscales represents a higher degree of presence of the construct in the individual. Burnout, measured through Burnout Assessment Tool (BAT) (Schaufeli et al., 2019) has a total score of 60. The obtained mean was 34.80 with SD of 7.95, which represents a moderately high level of burnout amongst the sample aspirants. Exam anxiety, measured through the Test and Examination Anxiety Measure (TEAM) (Brooks et al., 2015) has the highest possible score of 130. In the current study, the obtained mean and SD are 76.44 and 10.83 respectively. This represents a high level of exam anxiety amongst the sample. As for ASE, it was measured through the General Academic Self-Efficacy Scale (GASE) (Nielsen et al., 2018) which is a 5-item scale with the highest possible score of 25. Mean obtained is 20.29 and SD is 3.32 which reflects that the aspirants who were a part of the study had a high level of academic self-efficacy on an average.

Table 2—Multiple regression analyses predicting values of ASE from distractibility, worry, rumination, trait anxiety and state anxiety (components of exam anxiety), exhaustion, mental distance, cognitive impairment, emotional impairment (components of burnout)

Predictors	β	SeB	<i>p</i>
Trait Anxiety**	-.308	-.280	.002
State Anxiety*	.163	.230	.013
Cognitive Impairment*	-.251	-.181	.045

** < 0.01

* < 0.05

ASE was put as the criterion variable and the other nine variables—distractibility, worry, rumination, trait anxiety and state anxiety (components of exam anxiety), exhaustion, mental distance, cognitive impairment, emotional impairment (components of burnout)—were put as predictor variables. Multiple regression analysis was performed on the data set of 120 respondents. In the final model, only three variables could enter—state anxiety, trait anxiety (factors of exam anxiety) and cognitive impairment (factor of burnout). The β value calculated for state anxiety was .163 which was significant at .05 level. Trait anxiety and cognitive impairment carried a negative β weight of -.308 and -.251 and were significant at .01 and .05 level respectively. Using the step-wise method, a significant model emerged: $F(3,116) = 5.74, p < .01$. The model explains 10% of the variance (Adjusted $R^2 = 0.107$). Therefore, H_1 is accepted, which stated that there is an impact of factors of burnout on academic self-efficacy. We also accept H_2 which stated that factors of exam anxiety will predict ASE.

DISCUSSION

Results indicate that both burnout and exam anxiety predict ASE. State anxiety positively predicts ASE. This implies that aspirants may need an optimal amount of anxiety induced by a testing situation, that could help them boost their performance. On the other hand, trait

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anxiety, which is defined as the level of anxiety an individual experiences on a daily basis (Brooks et al., 2015), has a negative impact on ASE. This implied that aspirants who are generally anxious or underconfident may struggle to keep a high sense of ASE. Lastly, cognitive impairment, which majorly focused on concentration issues amongst aspirants, has a negative impact on ASE.

Implications, suggestions, limitations

The plight of the mental health of aspirants is deteriorating and poor. Aspirants face constant pressure, stress, depressive symptoms and anxiety (Kavakci et al., 2014; Prasad et al., 2022; Raman & Elakkiya, 2021) due to the enormous pressure, the rat race and the never-ending competition. These factors might make it difficult for aspirants to take care of their mental health. Therefore, it is imperative to conduct studies that could help us better understand factors that influence the academic performance of these students. The current study aims to shed light on one such factor that influences academic performance—ASE—and understand the factors that affect ASE amongst aspirants. The study focuses on ASE and whether it is predicted by burnout, and exam anxiety, both of which are commonly faced by aspirants. It aims to bridge a research gap in the Indian literature on the mental health of competitive exam aspirants. While numerous studies focus on the mental health of graduate and undergraduate students (Galyon et al., 2012; Hefner & Eisenberg, 2009; Kundu, 2019; Pedrelli et al., 2015; Rahmati, 2015), there is a dearth of studies that primarily focus on competitive exam aspirants. This study aligns with the previous literature which establishes an association between ASE, burnout and exam anxiety (Safarzaie et al., 2017; Yoon & Jung, 2014). Aspirants will benefit from boosting their ASE via reducing burnout and exam anxiety. Some suggestions to do the aforementioned are discussed further.

Exam anxiety is faced by aspirants commonly (Kavakci et al., 2014). It is the feeling of worry that a student experiences regarding appearing for an examination. An effective way to overcome evaluation apprehension, or exam anxiety, is to use effective studying techniques, planning the study regime timely, having strong social support, restructuring and reframing thoughts to help boost motivation and maintaining physical well-being. The use of technology has also shown that exam anxiety can be managed through video/media interventions (Grassi et al., 2011). Improving self-image and use of hypnosis can also help minimize exam anxiety (Hart & Hart, 1996; Roney & Woods, 2003). Other general techniques that can be used to manage anxiety are—staying focused, practicing relaxation techniques, having a positive attitude and preparing well (Shah, 2017). Burnout is also known to impact students to a point that it can induce behavioural changes (Tomaschewski-Barlem et al., 2014). Signs of burnout include but are not limited to emotional tiredness, low productivity, feeling of lethargy and low mood (Tomaschewski-Barlem et al., 2014; Tomaschewski-Barlem et al., 2013). Interventions like Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), mindfulness therapy, relaxation, Rational Emotive Behavioural Therapy (REBT) is known to effectively reduce burnout amongst students (Ezenwaji et al., 2019; Igbokwe et al., 2019; Madigan et al., 2023). Strategies that students themselves can employ include time management, effective planning of their schedules, having a hobby, taking breaks when needed, sleeping properly, maintaining a healthy diet, and trying to strike a balance between their social and study lives. These strategies may help an aspirant work diligently on achieving their goal and also keep their mental health afloat.

The study had a few limitations. The sample was small to make inferences that are highly generalizable. The data was collected through self-report inventories, and the participants

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could have filled in faulty responses due to social desirability, lack of time, or lack of interest in participation. The sample was Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic (WEIRD) (Newson & Atherton, 2021).

CONCLUSION

The study aimed at assessing the impact of exam anxiety and burnout ASE. Exam anxiety is measured on five subscales—distractibility, worry, rumination, trait anxiety and state anxiety. Whereas burnout constituted of the following four factors—mental distance, cognitive impairment, emotional impairment. The study had a sample size of 120 participants and used a multiple regression analysis model. The results indicate that state anxiety positively impacted ASE, whereas trait anxiety and cognitive impairment have a negative impact. The study aims to better understand ASE, a known factor to affect academic performance in competitive exam aspirants.

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Acknowledgment

The author(s) appreciates all those who participated in the study and helped to facilitate the research process.

Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

How to cite this article: Bansal, S. & Geher, G. (2024). The Impact of Burnout and Exam Anxiety on the Academic Self-Efficacy of Competitive Exam Aspirants. *International Journal of Indian Psychology*, 12(2), 3446-3455. DIP:18.01.303.20241202, DOI:10.25215/1202.303