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Research Paper

Academic Resilience and Stress Among Gap Year Students

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ABSTRACT

The study examines the differences in academic resilience and stress among Gap Year Students preparing for competitive examinations and Non-Gap Year Students in India. As there is an increase in number of students opting for gap years in order to prepare for exams like NEET, JEE, UPSC and similar, it becomes necessary to explore how these academic decisions influence the psychological wellbeing of students. The sample comprised of 60 participants (30 gap year and 30 non-gap year students), between 17 to 25 years of age, selected through purposive sampling method. Data was collected via Google Form using Academic Resilience (ARS-30) scale and a Stress questionnaire. Responses were stored securely and data was analyzed via SPSS software by using independent sample t-test. The findings indicated that gap year students scored significantly lower in perseverance than non-gap year students. They showed lower negative affect and emotional response, suggesting better emotional regulation. There was no significant difference in reflective and adaptive help-seeking as observed between the two groups of students. Gap Year students scored significantly higher in stress than non-gap year students. This study highlights the need for structured emotional support for students, particularly those who take a break from regular academic programs to prepare for high stakes competitive examinations.

Keywords: *Academic Resilience, Stress, Gap Year Students, Non-Gap Year Students, Cross-sectional design*

In India, academic performance has been traditionally a major concern among students, parents and teachers/educators. The competition to get into reputed and prestigious institutes likes All India Institute of Medical Science (AIIMS), Indian Institute of Technology (IIT), National Law Universities (NLU) and career like Civil Services has increased over the years. As a result, many of the students opt for a gap year. Gap Year Students are students who have taken a break of one or more years from regular/formal academic programs so as to prepare for competitive examinations in India. They are aspirants preparing for NEET (National Eligibility-cum-Entrance Test), JEE (Joint Entrance Examination), UPSC (Union Public Service Commission) exam, and other central and state level examinations such as GATE, GMAT, CLAT, CUET, banking examinations and similar. They dedicate extended periods of time for preparation, often after one or more unsuccessful attempts. They enroll in coaching institutions, join online preparation platforms

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or opt for self-study. Many of the students shift to urban centers and stay in hostels, paying guest accommodations.

Students who aim to pursue medical fields such as MBBS, BDS, BAMS prepare for the NEET examination. While those who aim for engineering institutes and colleges like IITs and NITs prepare for the JEE examination. Students who want their career in civil services like IAS, IPS and IFS prepare for the UPSC examinations. The selection ratio for these tests is extremely low, and their curricula are extensive. Due to highly competitive nature of the examinations, societal expectations, and psychological impact of prior failure, the students are under a great deal of pressure. Conceptual clarity, rigorous memorization, sustained focus and effective time management are required for these tests. Moreover, there is often a hidden pressure to "make up for the time lost", which increases anxiety and stress. Most of the students experience a decline in their self-esteem, worry about family and societal expectations, and fear about future failure. Not all respond in the same way. While some give up, others develop resilience and stay focused and motivated. It is hence, essential to study both academic stress they experience and endure and the resilience they show.

Academic Resilience has been referred to as an increased likelihood of (academic) success despite environmental adversities (Wang et al.,1994). Stress can be defined as a state of worry or mental tension caused by a difficult situation (World Health Organization,2023). Resilient students are described as those who maintain high motivational achievement and performance even when faced with stressful events and conditions that place them at risk of poor performance (Alva, 1991) and as those who succeed at school despite the presence of adverse conditions (Waxman et al.,2003). Abiola and Udofia (2011) reported higher perceived stress, anxiety and depression in low resilience medical students following completion of a major professional examination. Academic resilience refers to a student's capacity to effectively deal with academic setbacks, stress, and adversity and still achieve successful outcomes in their studies. It is considered to be a key component of student success in higher education (Martin & Marsh, 2006). Martin (2013, p488) defined academic resilience as 'the capacity to overcome acute and/or chronic adversity that is seen as a major threat to a student's academic development'. Academic Resilience refers to academic achievement in spite of a challenging or difficult circumstance in the educational process (Mallick & Kaur, 2016). They investigated the relationship between learning environment and academic resilience among senior secondary school students. The results demonstrated that boys score more in academic resilience than girls and urban students have more scores in learning environment than rural environment. Cassidy, S. (2015) investigated the nature of the association between academic self-efficacy (ASE) and academic resilience. The sample comprised 435 British undergraduate students. The tools of the measurement were General Academic Self-Efficacy Scale (GASE) and Academic Resilience Scale-30(ARS-30). Academic Self-efficacy was correlated with and a significant predictor of academic resilience and students exhibited greater academic resilience when responding to vicarious adversity compared to personal adversity.

A study conducted on students appearing for competitive exams for their under-graduation in India showed that students with higher levels of stress tend to perform worse in exams, whereas resilience is a protective factor that helps students cope with stress better. Students who scored relatively higher in resilience reported stronger time management and emotional control capabilities (Sarkar, 2024). A study conducted among aspirants of various competitive examinations showed a significant correlation (0.34, $p < 0.01$) among social

support, self-efficacy and resilience as predictors of achievement motivation. (Sh, M. L. Z. a. M. G., 2013)

A case study conducted on two NEET aspirants, showed that the lack of emotional support in the absence of parents was a major factor as reported by the two clients. The major concern given by the clients were: not able to complete the lengthy syllabus and the fear of not getting selected in the NEET exam. The lack of achievement in every weekend mock NEET was increasing the stress (Pushparaj. B, Vidya. N, 2024).

This study aims to examine the differences between academic resilience and stress between gap year and non-gap year students. The research aims to understand how the decision of opting for a gap year, to enhance examination readiness, affects their psychological state. By using standardized tools like the Academic Resilience Scale (ARS-30) and the Stress Questionnaire, this study explores whether the gap year students exhibit greater resilience when faced with academic setbacks or face high psychological stress in comparison to the non-gap year students. The findings of the study intend to contribute to the existing body of knowledge and to provide practical insights for educators, counselors, law/policy makers in forming academic support systems. The study also emphasizes on the importance of parental awareness and involvement as they play a major role in providing a supportive environment that encourages confidence and perseverance, especially during repeated academic challenges.

Objectives

1. To ascertain the differences in academic resilience between Gap Year and Non-Gap Year students.
2. To examine the differences in stress between Gap year and Non-Gap Year students.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study follows a quantitative cross-sectional design to compare Academic Resilience and Stress among Gap Year Students and Non-Gap Year Students. The study focuses on Academic Resilience and Stress among two groups of students- those who have taken breaks from regular/formal academic programs to prepare for competitive examinations (Gap Year Students) and those whose are continuing regular/formal academic programs without taking a break (Non-Gap Year Students).

Sample

The sample comprised of 60 participants from across India. The participants included students between the age of 17-25. Both female and male participants were included in the study. Group I consisted of 30 Gap Year Students and Group II consisted of 30 Non-Gap Year Students.

Purposive sampling method was used and data was collected via Google Form Questionnaire that was circulated through personal networks and social networking sites. The Google form included demographic section that collected participants' background details, the Academic Resilience Scale (ARS-30) and the Stress questionnaire. The google form was circulated among participants based on inclusion and exclusion criteria.

The inclusion criteria for Gap Year Students were participants who are currently in their second or subsequent gap year and are not enrolled in any regular/formal academic program.

They were required to be actively preparing for competitive examinations such as NEET, JEE, UPSC, or similar. Participants those who had changed their academic stream after a previous gap year were also eligible. For Non-Gap Year Students, participants who were currently enrolled in regular academic program.

Individuals below 17 or above 25 years are excluded from the study. Students currently in their first gap year. Participants who were partially enrolled in part-time/short-term academic programs were also excluded from the study to ensure clear distinction between complete break from regular/formal education and active academic engagement. Students who have taken a break from their academics in case of any medical condition, health issues or any other problem were also excluded from the study.

All the participants were provided with an informed consent before proceeding with the questionnaire. They were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation and their right to withdraw anytime. Confidentiality was ensured and no personal identifiable information was collected. Demographic data including age, gender, family type, number of gap years, academic stream and type of accommodation (e.g., hostel, home or paying guest) were also collected. The data was stored securely and used only for statistical analysis.

Instruments

Two standardized scales were used:

1. **Academic Resilience Scale (ARS-30):** Developed by Simon Cassidy in 2016 to measure resilience in academic settings using 30 items on a 5-point rating scale (strongly agree to strongly disagree). This scale assesses three dimensions of academic resilience– perseverance, reflecting and adaptive help-seeking, negative affect and emotional response.
2. **Stress Questionnaire:** Developed by Ashutosh Singh, Khushdeep Singh, Amit Kumar, Abhishek Shrivastava, Santosh Kumar in 2024. This questionnaire assesses mental stress 5-point rating scale using 28 items.

Procedure

Participants were shared an online Google form link via personal networks and social networking sites. Informed consent was obtained, detailing the study's purpose, voluntary participating, anonymity and confidentiality. Demographic data was collected, followed by the Academic Resilience Scale (ARS-30) and the Stress Questionnaire. The questionnaire took 10-15 minutes to complete. Responses were stored securely and data was analyzed using the SPSS software.

RESULTS AND INTERPRETATIONS

Objective 1: To ascertain the differences in academic resilience between Gap Year and Non-Gap Year students.

Table 1: Effect of Gap Year Status on Academic Resilience (Perseverance)

	Gap Year Students			**Non-Gap Year Students**					
	N	***M***	***SD***	***N***	***M***	***SD***	***t***	***df***	***p***
Perseverance	30	55.20	3.134	30	62.60	2.127	-10.702	58	.000**

Gap Year Students (M=55.20, SD=3.134) scored significantly lower in perseverance than Non-Gap Year Students (M=62.20, SD=2.127), $t(58) = -10.702$, $^{**}p < .001$ (Table 1), suggesting that the time away from structured academic environments may affect students' ability to stay focused and committed to tasks.

Table 2: Effect of Gap Year Status on Academic Resilience (Reflecting and Adaptive Help- Seeking)

	Gap Year Students			**Non-Gap Year Students**					
Reflecting and Adaptive Help-Seeking	***N***	***M***	***SD***	***N***	***M***	***SD***	***t***	***df***	***p***
	30	39.47	1.502	30	40.23	1.775	-1.806	58	.076

Gap Year Students (M=39.47, SD=1.502) scored slightly lower in reflecting and adaptive help-seeking than the Non-Gap Year Students (M=40.23, SD=1.775), $t(58) = -1.806$, $p > .05$ (Table 2), suggesting that whether a student took a gap year or not, did not significantly influenced their help-seeking behavior.

Table 3: Effect of Gap Year Status on Academic Resilience (Negative Affect and Emotional Response)

	Gap Year Students			**Non-Gap Year Students**					
Negative Affect and Emotional Response	***N***	***M***	***SD***	***N***	***M***	***SD***	***t***	***df***	***p***
	30	21.57	2.661	30	30.43	1.223	-16.583	58	.000**

Gap Year Students (M=21.57, SD=2.661) scored significantly lower in negative affect and emotional response than the Non-Gap Year Students (M=30.43, SD=1.223), $t(58) = -16.583$, $^{**}p < .001$ (Table 3), reflecting that they coped better with academic setbacks.

Objective 2: To examine the differences in stress between Gap year and Non-Gap Year students.

Table 4: Effect of Gap Year Status on Stress

	Gap Year Students			**Non-Gap Year Students**					
Stress	***N***	***M***	***SD***	***N***	***M***	***SD***	***t***	***df***	***p***
	30	66.47	8.266	30	44.90	4.894	12.297	58	.000**

Gap Year Students (M=66.47, SD=8.266) scored significantly higher in stress than the Non-Gap Year Students (M=44.90, SD=4.894), $t(58) = 12.297$, $^{**}p < .001$ (Table 4), indicating that students who have taken a gap year considerably experienced more stress.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The study examined the differences in academic resilience and stress between Gap Year Students preparing for competitive examinations and Non-Gap Year Students. The results provided meaningful insights about the psychological effects of taking a gap year, particularly within the high-pressure academic scenario.

Gap Year Students scored significantly lower in terms of perseverance than Non-Gap Year Students, suggesting that although gap years are often taken with the intention of focused preparation, the lack of regular academic structure may weaken the ability of students to stay consistent and goal-driven. The results indicated that there was no significant difference in terms of reflective and adaptive help-seeking behavior between the two groups of students, suggesting that the tendency to seek help when encountered with academic challenges is comparatively stable behavior across students, possibly due to more personal disposition and cultural perspective rather than the academic path taken. Furthermore, gap year students scored significantly lower on negative affect and emotional response than non-gap year students, indicating that they were able to control their emotional reactions to setbacks better in spite of experiencing more stress. However, gap year students scored significantly higher in terms of stress levels. This result aligns with previous studies which have shown that competitive examination aspirants experience academic, high pressure to perform and parental expectations for success and uncertainty affect students' mental health. Non-Gap Year Students, on the other hand, reported significantly lower stress levels, which can be due to structured academic program, regular peer interaction and continuous academic engagement.

Implications

1. According to the findings, gap year students have higher stress levels, which if left unaddressed, can lead to anxiety, burnout and lack of motivation. This emphasizes the need for organized support networks like counselling, mentoring that extend beyond traditional education setting and acknowledge the importance of academic resilience.
2. This study also suggests the significance of parental awareness and involvement as they can create a holistic and comprehensive learning environment for students that fosters perseverance and confidence, especially in case of repeated academic challenges.
3. Educational counsellors and psychologists can create and carry out structured interventions on resilience, stress coping mechanisms for students facing academic difficulties.
4. Academic institutes such as coaching centers can use these interventions that are necessary for psychological wellbeing of the students.

Limitations

1. This study included small sample size (60 participants) which limits generalizability to the wider population.
2. The study also lacked qualitative insights which limits understanding students' experiences behind the scores.
3. There was no control for pre-existing mental health conditions that could influence resilience and stress levels.
4. The study did not systematically assess culturally diverse participants, which restricts the application of findings across different regions.

Future Directions

1. Future studies can include larger sample size to enhance generalizability.
2. Qualitative methods can be used to gain deeper and holistic understanding of students experiences behind the scores and their coping strategies.
3. Biological indicators of stress such as cortisol levels, heart rate, etc., can be incorporated besides self-report measures for more nuanced assessment.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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