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Research Paper

Between Tracks and Minds: Psychological Adaptation and Fatigue in Daily Commuting among Student Commuters in Mumbai

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ABSTRACT

Urban rail commuting is not only a physical burden but also a psychological journey. This study examined 100 student commuters (aged 16–22) in Mumbai, focusing on anxiety, helplessness, and exhaustion. Results revealed a bell-shaped curve of anxiety: mid-term commuters (18–20) experienced the highest stress, while older students (21–22) showed emotional habituation yet continued to suffer physical fatigue. These patterns align with established stress models, highlighting predictable exhaustion, peak strain, and unforeseen resilience. The findings suggest that although commuters adapt emotionally, their bodies endure lasting costs. Implications include adjustments in academic scheduling, transport infrastructure, and student stress-management initiatives to safeguard well-being.

Keywords: *commuting stress, anxiety curve, habituation, fatigue, learned helplessness, student resilience*

When one awakens each morning, dawn is often described as a new beginning. For thousands of students in Mumbai, however, gratitude quickly gives way to urgency as they race toward trains, lungs burning, bodies pressed into crowds, and minds already bracing for the day ahead. For them, commuting is not an option but a necessity, an invisible toll that must be paid before learning can even begin.

The paradox of journeys being more important than destinations fades when journeys unfold in compartments so overcrowded that safety, dignity, and energy feel constantly threatened. Mumbai's suburban railways, carrying millions daily, turn routine travel into a relentless test of endurance. Students, especially, spend one to two hours each way inside these conditions, where survival itself feels like the day's first achievement.

According to a 2023 report in The Times of India, Mumbai's suburban trains carry over 7.5 million passengers daily, with student commuters among the most vulnerable to fatigue and accidents. Such lived conditions reinforce why commuting is not merely logistical but psychological.

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The Foreseen

Psychological research has long shown that daily hassles erode well-being more than major life events because they are repetitive, uncontrollable, and cumulative. In this context, it was natural to anticipate that Mumbai's students would report fatigue, helplessness, and declining energy levels. The foreseen was clear, commuting would drain both body and mind, leaving little for academic or personal pursuits.

'Mental stress isn't theoretical, it's palpable.' As Dr. Harish Shetty, a Mumbai psychiatrist, says: 'Entering a local train is a skilled experience… you have to take care of your sweat, little fights,' capturing the fear and physicality of daily rushes. Deccan Herald

The Seen

Our data confirmed this prediction. Students consistently rated their commutes as highly draining, often between 7–10 on a ten-point scale. Many admitted skipping classes because exhaustion outweighed attendance. Qualitative accounts described panic in rush hours, aggression from co-passengers, and constant physical strain. These findings echo broader studies linking chronic stress to emotional disengagement, absenteeism, and reduced concentration. What was seen, then, was not only exhaustion but also observable helplessness and avoidance behaviours that compromised education itself.

"For many long-distance commuters heading to Khopoli, Karjat, or Virar, a trip to college is less commute and more survival test, a daily nightmare of sardine-density crowds and peril" The Times of India

The Unforeseen

Yet within this familiar story of strain emerged a paradox. Anxiety did not rise linearly but followed a bell-shaped curve: it peaked among mid-term commuters (ages 18–20) and then declined in more experienced ones (21–22). Younger commuters reported fear and claustrophobia; mid-term commuters experienced peak helplessness and emotional overload; and seasoned commuters appeared emotionally desensitised, though they continued to endure severe physical fatigue. This pattern reveals that while emotional reactivity dulls with experience, the physiological toll persists.

Agenda and Relevance

This study therefore examines commuting as both a psychological journey and a physical trial. By framing our findings through stress theories such as General Adaptation Syndrome, the Yerkes–Dodson Law, habituation, and learned helplessness, we position Mumbai's trains as a natural laboratory for understanding resilience, adaptation, and depletion. The agenda is not only to document fatigue, helplessness, and resilience but also to highlight commuting as a central factor shaping student well-being.

In sum, the foreseen fatigue, the seen helplessness, and the unforeseen bell-shaped curve of anxiety reveal commuting as more than a logistical challenge, it is a profound psychological experience that demands urgent academic, infrastructural, and psychological interventions.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Participants

Recognising that the pulse of a problem is best captured at its source, we engaged directly with students who endure the daily challenges of urban commuting. A total of 100 student

commuters, aged 16 to 22 years, participated in the study. The group reflected a balanced gender representation and was predominantly composed of college students residing in the suburban belts of Mumbai, areas from which lengthy train commutes into educational hubs are routine.

This demographic was deliberately chosen, as students in this age range represent a critical developmental stage where academic demands intersect with identity formation and resilience-building. Their willingness to articulate lived experiences on a structured platform provided both breadth and depth, ensuring that the dataset captured not only numerical ratings but also the texture of daily survival and adaptation.

Measures

A mixed-method design was employed, combining quantitative scales with qualitative narratives.

- ***Quantitative Data:*** Respondents reported age, commute duration (morning and evening, in minutes), and self-rated symptom frequencies on a 5-point Likert scale. Symptoms included panic/paranoia, claustrophobia, sadness/depression, helplessness, emotional detachment, irritability, and physical exhaustion. These dimensions were chosen to reflect both affective distress (e.g., anxiety, sadness, claustrophobia) and somatic strain (e.g., exhaustion). Respondents also rated the overall mental drain of their commute on a 10-point scale.
- ***Qualitative Data:*** Open-ended reflections captured subjective experiences. Prompts encouraged descriptions of emotional states, coping strategies, and personal observations, revealing perceptions of crowd aggression, escapist fantasies (e.g., "Doraemon's Anywhere Door"), or resignation (e.g., "Nothing helps").

Analysis

Data were analysed at two complementary levels.

- ***Quantitative Analysis*****:** Responses were grouped into three age categories: younger commuters (16–17 years), mid-term commuters (18–20 years), and experienced commuters (21–22 years). Descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) were computed, along with correlations between commute time and mental drain. To examine the non-linear trajectory of anxiety, a quadratic regression model was estimated with Age and Age^2 as predictors. The quadratic term was statistically significant ($\beta = -0.27$, $p < .05$), confirming the bell-shaped curve of anxiety across age groups. Visualisations (bar graphs, heatmaps) were generated to illustrate symptom distributions.
- ***Qualitative Analysis:*** Open-ended responses were thematically coded into categories such as fatigue, social alienation, wishful/fantasy coping, and resilience. This approach revealed how students interpreted strain, whether overwhelming, normalised, or temporarily alleviated through avoidance strategies such as zoning out or listening to music.

Participation was voluntary, and all students provided informed consent. No personally identifying information was collected. The study was conducted in accordance with principles of confidentiality, anonymity, and respect for participant well-being. Ethical approval was not required, as the research involved a non-interventional, anonymous survey.

Table 1 Means and Standard Deviations of Anxiety by Age Group (N = 100)

Age Group	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)
16–17	2.8	0.9
18–20	4.1	1.1
21–22	3.0	1.0

Note. Anxiety was measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Never, 5 = Always).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

I. Target Age Group:

- Younger commuters (16–18 years)
- Mid-term commuters (18–20 years)
- Experienced commuters (21–22 years)

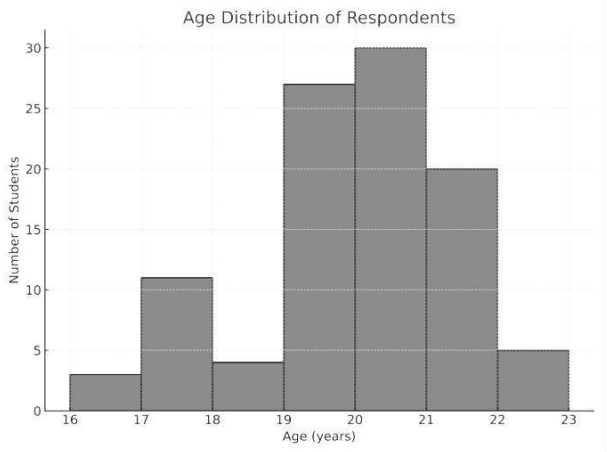


Figure 1. Age distribution of student commuters (N = 100). Most respondents fell between 18–20 years.

1. *General Adaptation Syndrome: Stress Across Phases*

Hans Selye's General Adaptation Syndrome (1936) remains one of the foundational models of stress psychology. It proposes that when confronted with stressors, individuals pass through three sequential stages: Alarm, where the body first reacts with heightened arousal; Resistance, where sustained effort is mounted to cope with the stressor; and finally, Exhaustion, when prolonged strain depletes both physical and emotional resources. In theory, this cycle charts the progression of stress from initial shock to eventual burnout.

In our study, this theoretical framework found a vivid reflection in the lived experiences of student commuters:

- *Younger commuters (16–18 years):* Their responses aligned with the Alarm stage, characterised by novelty-driven stress. Panic, claustrophobia, and remarks such as "Scary, so crowded" captured the initial shock of entering Mumbai's daily rush.
- *Mid-term commuters (18–20 years):* Here, stress responses peaked. Students reported the highest levels of helplessness, sadness, and anxiety, suggesting that both body and mind were engaged in the Resistance stage—struggling to withstand the unrelenting pressure of daily travel.
- *Experienced commuters (21–22 years):* Interestingly, these students displayed fewer overt signs of anxiety or panic. Instead, they described emotional numbness coupled with profound fatigue, embodying the Exhaustion stage. Though they had adapted emotionally, the physical toll persisted, leaving them drained yet resigned.

The striking outcome is that our data revealed a bell-shaped curve of anxiety: stress reactions rose sharply with initial exposure, peaked during mid-term commuting years, and then diminished as adaptation set in. Yet, while emotional reactivity dulled with experience, the body continued to pay the price through chronic physical exhaustion. In other words, students did not escape the cycle of stress, they simply shifted its burden from the mind to the body.

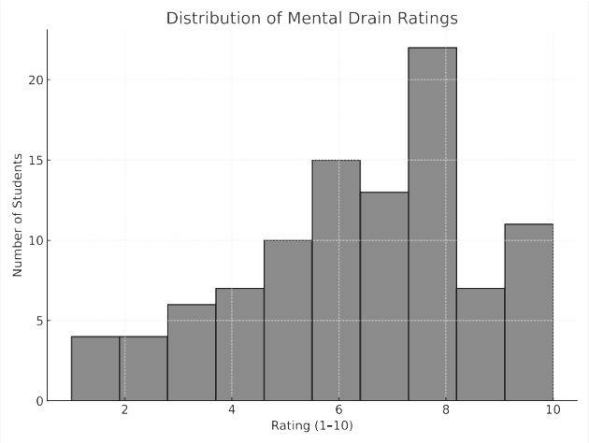


Figure 2. Mental Drain Rating Distribution

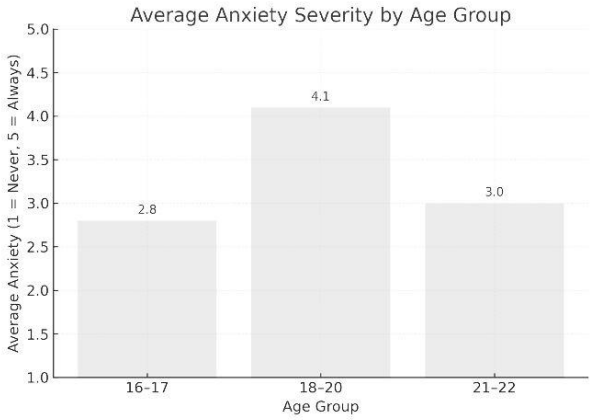


Figure 3. Severity of Anxiety by Age (Bell Shaped Curve) (1 = never, 5 = always)

2. Yerkes–Dodson Law: From Sharpness to Collapse

The Yerkes–Dodson Law (1908) posits an inverted U-shaped relationship between stress and performance: while moderate stress can sharpen focus and enhance functioning, excessive stress overwhelms coping capacity and diminishes performance. In theory, stress is useful up to a point, beyond which it becomes destructive.

Our dataset brought this principle vividly to life.

- *Shorter commuters (16-17 years)* generated mild, manageable stress that students sometimes reframed as motivation. Several respondents described using this pressure as a "mental push," while others engaged in sports or routines to channel the tension productively.

- *Mid-term commuters (18–20 years)* embodied the peak of the curve. Stress levels here tipped from motivating to overwhelming. Students reported absenteeism, burnout, and a growing sense of helplessness, signalling that the stress load had exceeded their optimal zone.
- *Experienced commuters (21–22 years)* illustrated the decline phase. By this stage, stress no longer energised; instead, it exhausted. Many expressed emotional numbness with remarks such as "I'm used to it now, just tired."

Thus, commuting illustrates the full trajectory envisioned by Yerkes and Dodson: stress that begins as functional, rises into overload, and ultimately collapses into futility.

3. Habituation: Emotional Immunity

Groves and Thompson's Habituation Theory (1970) explains that repeated exposure to the same stimulus gradually diminishes the emotional response it evokes. In other words, what once felt overwhelming becomes ordinary, no longer triggering the same intensity of reaction.

Our findings reflected this process clearly. Seasoned commuters (21–22 years) seldom reported panic, paranoia, or the sharp anxiety that characterised their younger counterparts. For them, the rush of Mumbai's trains had become a familiar backdrop, a daily chaos that no longer startled or unnerved. The environment, once suffocating, had been psychologically normalised.

Yet this habituation carried a hidden cost. While the mind adapted, the body did not. Students continued to report high levels of physical exhaustion, lethargy, and absenteeism. The absence of emotional distress did not signal well-being but rather revealed a trade-off: emotional numbness masking the persistence of physiological strain.
In this sense, commuting demonstrates the paradox of habituation: the commuter becomes immune to fear, but not to fatigue.

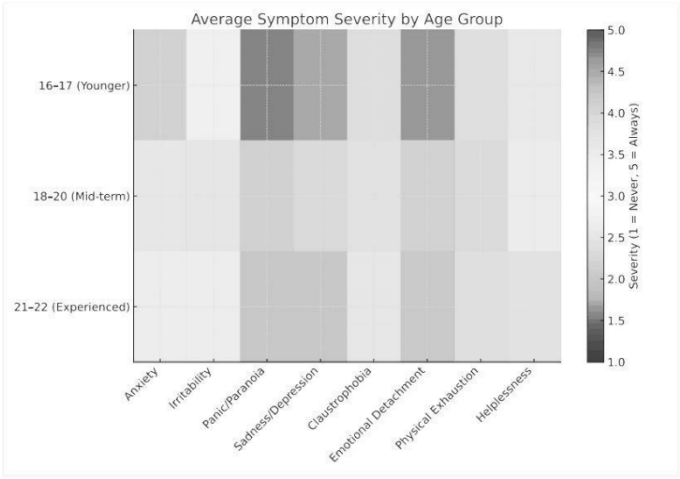


Figure 4. Symptom Severity by Age Group

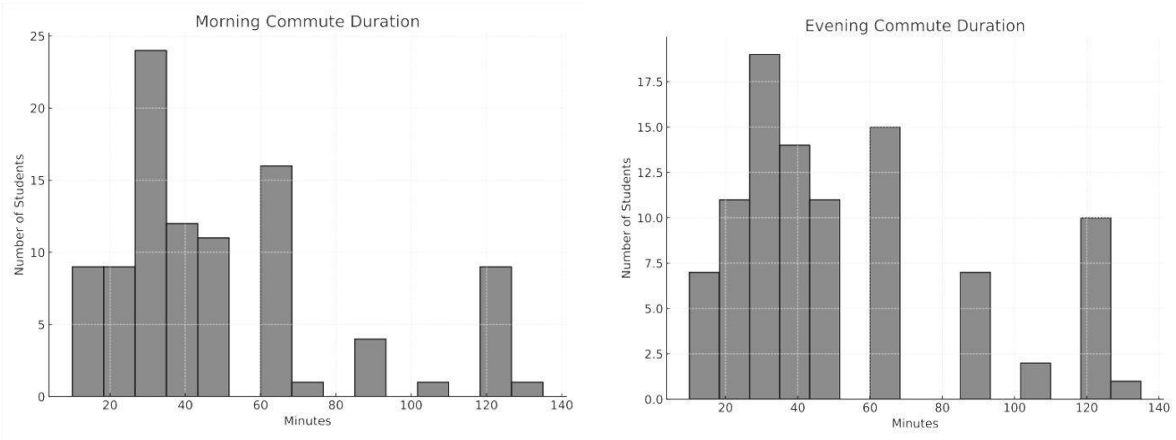
Figure 4 presents the compiled symptom analysis, highlighting peak anxiety among mid-term commuters while physical exhaustion persisted across all groups. Detailed plots for each individual symptom are provided in Appendix A (Figures A1–A8).

4. Learned Helplessness: "Nothing Helps"

Martin Seligman's Learned Helplessness (1967) describes how repeated exposure to uncontrollable stress fosters resignation and passivity. When individuals perceive that no effort can change their situation, they withdraw. This pattern was evident in our data. Many mid-term commuters (18–20 years) explicitly wrote *"Nothing helps"* or admitted to skipping classes, reflecting behavioural withdrawal and loss of control.

Commute duration amplified this helplessness. Morning journeys of 60–90 minutes (Figure 3) left students fatigued before classes even began, while equally long or longer evening commutes (Figure 4) drained any remaining energy for study or recovery. Consistently high mental drain scores (7–10) (Figure 2), peaking among mid-term commuters, highlighted not only exhaustion but the belief that nothing could improve their condition.

In effect, time itself became a stressor. Hours lost daily in uncontrollable environments conditioned a sense of futility, where "zoning out," skipping classes, or disengaging socially became common. Over time, such helplessness corrodes resilience, leaving students vulnerable to disengagement and depressive patterns. Thus, commuting emerges not merely as a logistical burden but as a psychological training ground in resignation.



Figures 5 & 6. Commute Durations with time as stress factor.

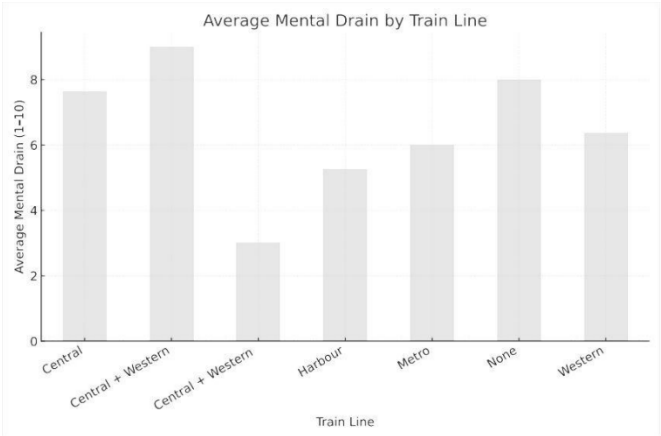


Figure 7. Average Mental Drain by Train Line

Differences also appeared across train lines. Students commuting via more congested routes reported higher drain, pointing to the environmental contribution of crowding and infrastructure.

5. Social Alienation & De-individualism

Students frequently voiced frustration at the behaviour of fellow commuters: "I wish people were nicer and would stop hitting." These complaints reflect more than irritation, they point to a deeper phenomenon of de-individualism, described by Philip Zimbardo (1969).

In large, anonymous crowds, individuals often lose their sense of self-awareness, leading to diminished empathy and heightened aggression. For students, this environment fostered alienation, where the crowd was no longer seen as a community but as a hostile force. Many responded with emotional detachment: "zoning out" or disengaging psychologically, as a protective shield against this social erosion. Thus, the commuting space transforms into one where survival demands not only physical endurance but also social withdrawal.

6. Coping Strategies: From Avoidance to Resilience

James Gross's emotion regulation framework (1998) offers a useful lens for categorising coping responses. Within our data, two distinct forms emerged:

- *Avoidance coping:* Students reported zoning out, listening to music, or engaging in fantasy (e.g., imagining "Doraemon's Anywhere Door"). These strategies offered short-term relief but did not alter the stressor itself.
- *Resilient coping:* Others adopted acceptance-based methods, sleeping during travel, or reframing the commute as "manageable, just tiring." These reflect more adaptive, long-term strategies that conserve psychological energy.

The diversity of coping styles across participants illustrates that resilience is not uniform. Students in identical conditions displayed markedly different levels of psychological adaptability, highlighting the role of individual differences in stress processing.

7. Maslow's Hierarchy: Lower Needs Blocking Growth

Abraham Maslow (1943) argued that human motivation follows a hierarchy, beginning with physiological and safety needs before progressing to higher pursuits such as learning, creativity, and self-actualisation. Our findings suggest that daily commuting disrupts these foundational layers. Students expend so much energy simply to "reach on time" that little remains for higher needs like focus, academic engagement, or personal growth. One respondent noted, "Exhaustion happened… I wish college started later," a sentiment that reflects the way commuting undermines both rest and security. This aligns with studies such as Evans & Wener (2006), which link extended commutes to reduced academic performance. This depletion reached beyond academic focus, stripping students of basic physiological security. Reports of fatigue, bodily strain, and health anxieties hinted that the costs of commuting extend into long-term risks such as musculoskeletal pain and hypertension. In essence, the journey consumes the very resources needed for the destination.

8. Qualitative Themes: Voices of Commuters

The open-ended reflections provided rich insight into the commuter psyche:

- Daily hassles: "Too much overcrowding, frequency must increase."
- Burnout: "Exhaustion happened… I wish college started later."

- Escapism: "Anywhere Door."
- Alienation: "People push, no one cares."
- Resilience: "Music and zoning out help me get through."

Together, these voices embody the seen, foreseen, and unforeseen:

- The foreseen fatigue and exhaustion that were expected.
- The seen helplessness and alienation confirmed by data.
- The unforeseen resilience, where students still found ways, however fragile, to endure.

These narratives remind us that statistics capture patterns, but personal voices reveal the texture of lived experience, where stress, adaptation, and creativity intermingle.

Physiological Side Effects and the Weight of Survival

While theories highlight stress and adaptation, the body reveals the most unforgiving story of commuting. Students described relentless physical wear: back pain, muscle cramps, and toe injuries from hours of standing in awkward, compressed positions; sharp blows from heavy bags pressed against their chest or stomach; suffocation and breathlessness in rush-hour crowds; and paranoia at the thought of missing a stop. Female students recounted the particular strain of commuting during menstruation, where exhaustion and discomfort intensified under the pressure of packed compartments.

The strain extended well beyond the train itself. Early mornings forced students to leave home half-asleep, often skipping breakfast to catch overcrowded trains. After four to eight hours of classes, they embarked on equally draining return journeys. Many reported weakness, unintended weight loss, or even falling asleep while standing, clinging to poles amid the crush of bodies. Irritation, aggression, and seat disputes added layers of social stress to physical exhaustion. One student encapsulated the paradox starkly: "We use all our energy to just reach, and none is left for the day ahead."

These experiences paint commuting not as routine transit but as daily survival theatre, where students push their bodies to the edge for the mere reward of attendance. The cumulative effect is more than fatigue; it is the slow erosion of physical health and motivation. Left unchecked, such exertion may seed hypertension, chronic musculoskeletal pain, menstrual health complications, and long-term depletion of resilience.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals a paradox at the heart of the student commuting experience.

- The Foreseen: As expected, daily train journeys drained both body and mind. Commutes lasting up to ninety minutes each way confirmed that commuting is not merely a logistical routine but a persistent stressor undermining energy and well-being.
- The Seen: Data uncovered a bell-shaped curve of anxiety. Mid-term commuters (18–20 years) exhibited the highest levels of helplessness, sadness, and fatigue, illustrating how sustained exposure amplifies psychological strain before adaptation emerges.
- The Unforeseen: With greater experience, students appeared emotionally desensitised to the rush, yet this habituation proved incomplete. While emotional responses dulled, physical exhaustion persisted. This divergence underscores a

critical split: psychological adaptation masks, but does not resolve, the enduring physiological costs of commuting.

In essence, commuting emerged not merely as movement across distance, but as a psychological journey of adaptation and depletion. These findings underscore the need for interventions at both institutional and infrastructural levels, recognising that what appears as resilience may in fact be a fragile shield masking deeper physical toll.

Implications

The present findings carry significance across multiple levels:

- *Institutional:* Colleges and universities can mitigate fatigue-related absenteeism by adopting later class timings, hybrid learning formats, or flexible attendance policies for long-distance commuters. Such adjustments would recognise commuting as a legitimate barrier to consistent academic engagement.
- *Policy:* Urban transport authorities should prioritise increasing train frequency, expand seating capacity, and implement effective crowd-management strategies. These measures would not only reduce chronic stressors but also enhance students' sense of safety and control. Recent calls in the public sphere for reserved compartments for students underscore the urgency of such reforms, and our findings lend psychological weight to these proposals.
- *Psychological:* Targeted interventions, including stress-management workshops, peer-support groups, and coping-skills training, can provide students with constructive strategies that move beyond avoidance. Such support promotes resilience while acknowledging the ongoing physiological toll.
- *Health:* Commuting is also a physiological hazard, predisposing students to hypertension, menstrual health strain, and chronic fatigue. Addressing these hidden costs requires health-sensitive institutional policies and transport infrastructure that safeguard student well-being. As one account starkly described, crowded trains often feel like "gas chambers on rails", a reminder of the urgent need for protective reforms.

Future Directions

While this study offers valuable insights, it also highlights areas for further research. Longitudinal investigations are needed to track how commuting stress influences academic performance, social relationships, and mental health trajectories over time. Equally important is exploring the translation of stress into long-term health outcomes such as hypertension, musculoskeletal pain, and motivational decline, linking commuting not only to education but to broader public health patterns. Future studies should examine the interplay between physiological exhaustion and psychological habituation to clarify how coping masks, but does not eliminate, bodily strain. Comparative research across Indian cities would also reveal whether these patterns are unique to Mumbai's railway networks or reflect broader dynamics of urban commuting in rapidly growing metropolitan regions.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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APPENDIX

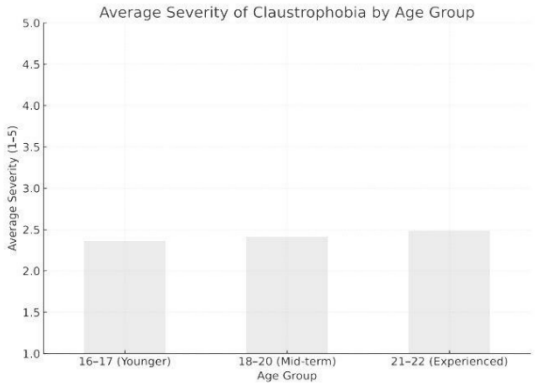

Figure A1. Severity of Claustrophobia by Age (1 = never, 5 = always).

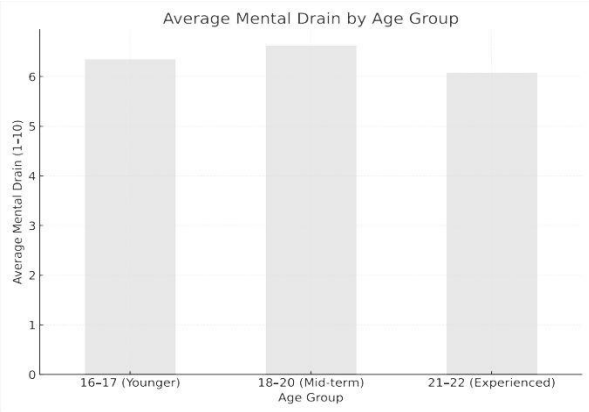

Figure A2. Average Mental Drain by Age Group (1 = never, 5 = always).

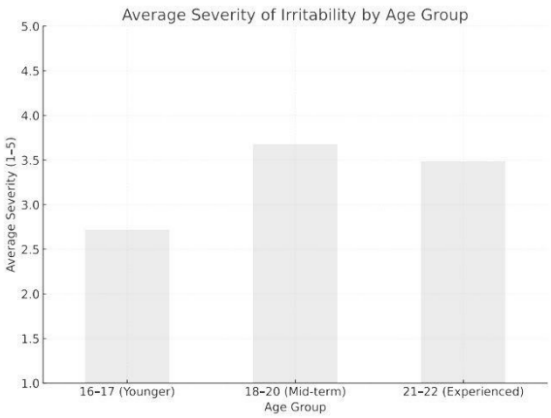

Figure A3. Severity of Irritability by Age (1 = never, 5 = always).

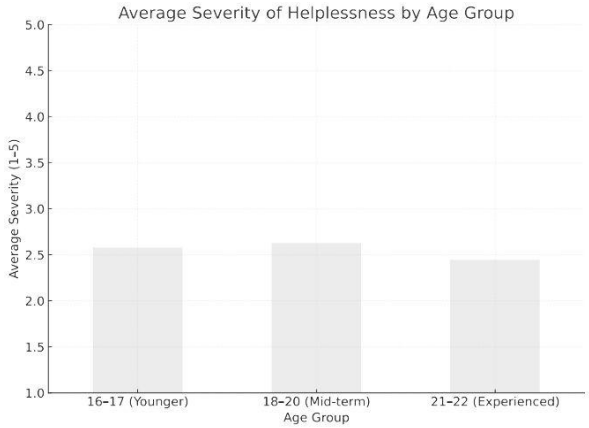

Figure A4. Severity of Helplessness by Age (1 = never, 5 = always)

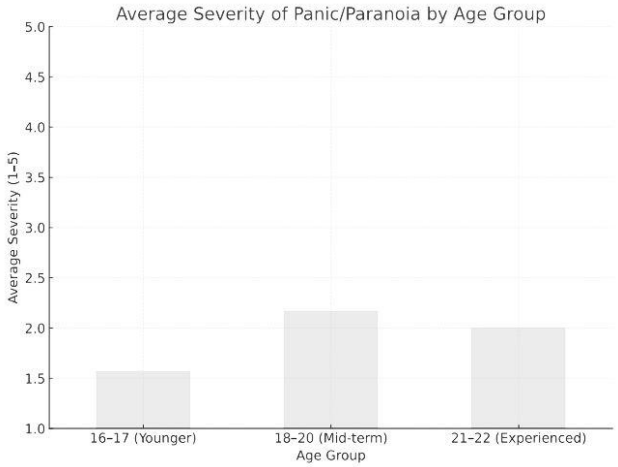

Figure A5. Severity of Panic/Paranoia by Age (1 = never, 5 = always).

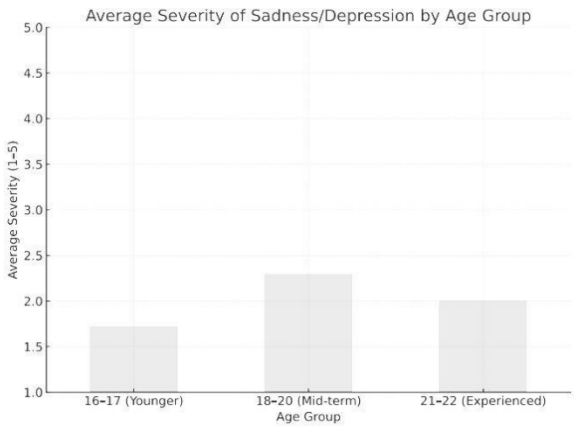

Figure A6. Severity of Sadness/Depression by Age (1 = never, 5 = always).

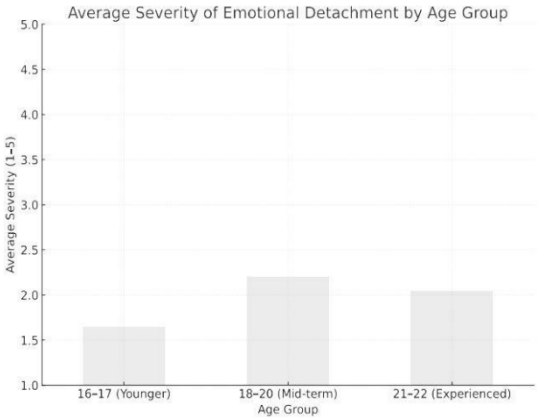

Figure A7. Severity of Emotional Detachment by Age (1 = never, 5 = always).

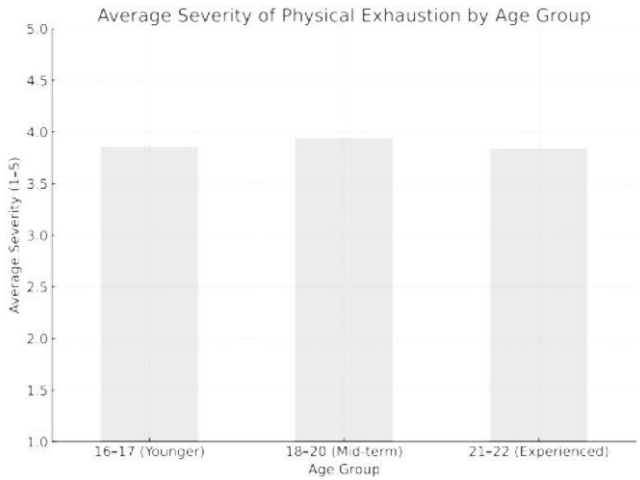

Figure A8. Severity of Physical Exhaustion by Age (1 = never, 5 = always).