

Research Paper

Academic Stress Related to Isolation and Social Withdrawal

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ABSTRACT

Academic stress has become a significant concern among emerging adults, particularly in competitive academic environments. The present study aimed to examine the relationship between academic stress and its association with social isolation and social withdrawal among college students. Emerging adulthood represents a critical developmental phase characterized by academic demands, identity exploration, and increasing performance expectations. Excessive academic pressure may not only influence academic functioning but also affect students' social and emotional well-being. Using standardized self-report measures, data were collected from college students to assess levels of academic stress, social isolation, and social withdrawal. The findings indicated a positive relationship between academic stress and both isolation and withdrawal behaviours. Students experiencing higher academic stress were more likely to report reduced social interaction and a tendency to disengage from peers. The results suggest that academic stress may contribute to diminished social connectedness during a stage where peer relationships are developmentally significant. The study highlights the need for academic institutions to address psychological well-being alongside academic performance. Early identification of stress-related social withdrawal patterns may help prevent long-term emotional difficulties among students. The findings contribute to the growing body of literature emphasizing the interconnected nature of stress and social functioning in emerging adulthood.

Keywords: *Academic Stress, Emerging Adulthood, Social Isolation, Social Withdrawal, Student Mental Health*

Academic stress has increasingly become a central psychological concern among college students. In highly competitive educational systems, students are often required to meet demanding academic standards while simultaneously navigating personal, social, and developmental challenges. The pressure to perform well academically, manage time effectively, and meet expectations from family and society can create significant emotional strain. When such demands exceed perceived coping abilities, academic stress emerges as a dominant experience.

Emerging adulthood, typically spanning the ages of 18 to 25 years, represents a transitional developmental stage characterized by identity exploration, career uncertainty, and expanding social networks. During this phase, peer relationships play a vital role in shaping emotional

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stability and self-concept. However, excessive academic pressure may disrupt social engagement, leading students to reduce interaction with peers and limit participation in social activities.

While academic stress has been widely studied in relation to anxiety, depression, and academic performance, its relationship with social isolation and social withdrawal has received comparatively less focused attention. Social isolation refers to reduced social contact, whereas social withdrawal involves active avoidance of social interactions. Both constructs can negatively influence psychological well-being, particularly during a stage where belongingness is crucial.

Understanding how academic stress relates to social disconnection is essential for developing preventive strategies in educational settings. Therefore, the present study seeks to explore the association between academic stress, social isolation, and social withdrawal among emerging adults.

Significance

The significance of the present study lies in its focus on the social consequences of academic stress. While many studies emphasize academic outcomes or emotional disorders, fewer investigations explore how stress influences students' social behaviour. By examining isolation and withdrawal alongside academic stress, this study broadens the understanding of stress beyond academic performance alone.

Second, the study highlights the developmental relevance of emerging adulthood. Social relationships during this stage contribute significantly to emotional resilience and identity formation. If academic stress interferes with social engagement, it may have long-term consequences on interpersonal development and psychological adjustment.

Third, the study holds practical significance for educational institutions. Understanding the link between stress and social withdrawal can help educators and counsellors design supportive interventions that address both academic and emotional needs. Preventive programs focusing on stress management and peer support may reduce the risk of long-term isolation.

Finally, the study contributes to the growing discussion around student mental health in competitive academic environments. By examining interconnected variables, the research encourages a holistic approach to student well-being rather than treating stress as an isolated phenomenon.

Objectives

1. To examine the relationship between academic stress and social isolation among emerging adults.
2. To assess the association between academic stress and social withdrawal among college students.
3. To understand whether increased academic stress predicts reduced social engagement during emerging adulthood.

Rationale

The topic was chosen due to the increasing observation that students experiencing academic pressure often tend to distance themselves socially. During emerging adulthood, peer

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interaction plays a crucial role in emotional development, yet academic demands frequently dominate students' daily routines. The visible shift from social engagement to isolation among stressed students attracted attention to explore whether academic stress contributes to social withdrawal patterns. Understanding this relationship is important in promoting balanced academic and psychological well-being.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Academic stress is a problem for students. The main reason for this stress is the amount of work they have to do and the pressure to do well. A lot of studies have found that having to learn a lot of things taking tests and being constantly graded can be really tough on students. This was shown in a study by Misra and McKean in 2000. Similar findings were reported in the Indian context where academic pressure and parental expectations were identified as major stressors among adolescents (Deb et al., 2015). Furthermore, a systematic review indicated that academic stress is consistently associated with anxiety and reduced wellbeing among students (Pascoe et al., 2020). Students have to pay attention all the time managing their time well and always do their best. This may be difficult for them to handle.

When there is too much pressure on the students to do well this may make them feel very tired, anxious and decreased motivation. This can affect their life and overall happiness. Some studies have also found that when students are under much pressure they might focus only on their school work and not spend time with friends. This can make them less social. Affect their relationships with others as shown in a study, by Kausar (2010). Many students have a time balancing school work with other things they want to do that their family wants them to do and taking care of themselves which makes them feel really overwhelmed and unable to handle things as well as they used to. Academic responsibilities and extracurricular activities and family expectations and personal well-being are all things that students have to deal with. Also, schools can be very competitive which makes students scared of not doing and comparing themselves to their friends and this can make them even more stressed out.

Research shows that when students are under a lot of pressure for a long time it can affect how they behave. They might not want to participate in social things as much and they might want to be alone more often. Academic stress is something that is made up of many different parts, which includes how hard the school work is, the kind of person the student is and the environment they are in. Researchers think it is crucial to understand all the parts of academic stress to see how it affects a student's mind and how they interact with others. The amount of school work students have to do is one of the parts of academic stress, like big piles of homework, constant tests, assignments and the pressure to perform well on exams. Studies have found that when students have much school work it can make them feel mentally exhausted, grumpy and less happy, with school, which can ultimately affect their emotional well-being and academic responsibilities and extracurricular activities and family expectations and personal well-being.

There is a lot of pressure on students to do well which can make school look really tough for them. This pressure usually comes from their parents, teachers and sometimes from people around them. To make others happy they want to get good grades. Some students get scared by the thought that they won't be able to do well, due to this fear they may feel anxious. They compare themselves with their friends, which makes them feel inferior about themselves. Research suggests that high academic expectations and fear of failure significantly predict emotional distress and maladaptive coping among students (Ang & Huan, 2006). Students avoid spending time with their close ones because of this and just

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focus on their school work. Basically, they do this as they do not want others to think bad about them. Academic burden and the stress of not doing well are significant challenges for many young people.

Time management is a problem for students. Balancing school work along with their life and other things they like to do is hard for them. Especially when students are becoming adults and they have to look after themselves. At that time students have to deal with a lot of things. Time management difficulties and putting things off until later are linked to feeling more stressed out and feeling like they are not in control of their school work. Time management difficulties and procrastination are issues for students. Studies on coping mechanisms indicate that avoidance-based strategies, including procrastination and disengagement, are linked with higher psychological maladjustment (Compas et al., 2001). Students stop enjoying with their friends when they feel stressed, making them feel alone and want to be by themselves. Difficulty in managing time can make students feel really overburdened.

Institutional and environmental things also affect how students feel about stress. When the school is really competitive and it is not clear how teachers grade and students do not get along with their teachers it can make students feel more stressed. Academic stress is a problem for students when they think school is too hard. They do not get the help they need from teachers. Some studies say that when students think school is too tough and they do not get support they might stop spending time with friends and just be alone because that is how they deal with academic stress.

Academic stress is a problem for students. It does not just affect how well they do in school. It influences how they deal with others. During adolescence and early twenties, they really want to feel like they belong and are linked to their friends which is a part of being happy and healthy as we can see from the work of Arnett in 2000. When students have too much school work, they often stop doing things with their friends and do not participate in social activities as much. Students who are under a lot of stress often say they have trouble talking to other people because they are tired, overwhelmed and just do not have enough time as shown by the research of Misra and McKean in 2000. Academic stress is really bad for students because it makes them feel like they cannot keep up with their friends and it makes them feel really lonely.

Social isolation is termed when an individual isolates him or herself from society and avoids social interactions. Empirical findings among college populations reveal that students with lower perceived social support report significantly higher academic stress and loneliness (Hefner & Eisenberg, 2009). As studied by Bedewy and Gabriel in 2015, academically stressed students intentionally isolate themselves from social engagement in order to focus on their academics. Social isolation may result in losing peer networks which are very important for coping with day-to-day stress. Whereas research by Cacioppo and Hawkley (2009) suggests that lack of social support may further increase emotional strain, creating a cycle where stress leads to isolation and isolation intensifies stress.

On the other hand, social withdrawal is when people avoid being around others. This is also related to stress from school. When students are really stressed out, they might stop hanging out with friends to deal with their emotions or avoid being judged by others. For example, a study done in 2009 found this information. Avoiding individuals may ultimately be harmful to their health, even though it might temporarily raise their moods. Longitudinal studies

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indicate that persistent social withdrawal during adolescence and emerging adulthood is associated with increased internalizing problems and reduced life satisfaction (Laursen & Hartl, 2013). It can also mean that they waste several chances to express themselves to somebody who may benefit them. Students who hide from conditions have to suffer more distress and are less satisfied with their life, per many studies. This shows why it is important to understand how stress from school can make students stop interacting with others as they become adults. Social withdrawal and stress from school are. We need to think about how social withdrawal affects students.

In general, social withdrawal and social isolation are two ideas that have similarities yet separate. When trying to discover how kids connect with their peers alongside people in their near neighbourhood, they should be examined. Those who refrain from speaking to each other as frequently as they do are more likely to be isolated from society. This might mean that they lack interest in events or that they have no individuals to whom they can really bond. Isolation from society can be hazardous among learners and is described as a situation where individuals invest a longer period separately as they want. Students often have to deal with a lot of pressure and tight deadlines which can make them cut back on socializing. This can put them at a risk of feeling isolated. When students are isolated for a time in an academic setting, they may not get the emotional support and help they need from others, which is important, for managing stress effectively as noted by Thoits in 2011.

People often see withdrawal as a behaviour where someone on purpose avoids or stays away from social interactions. It is different from being socially isolated which can happen because of things outside of a person's control. Social withdrawal is more about how a person reacts to feelings of discomfort, anxiety or stress (Rubin et al., 2009). Studies show that social isolation and social withdrawal often happen together and can make each other worse. Individuals who face a lot of expectations to do well academically might stop participating in programs, according to certain experts. They behave this way because they never wish to bother about stuff or face judgment by other people. This might make them feel a little better for a time. If they keep avoiding social events for a long time it can be bad for them in the long run. It can hurt their ability to get along with others. It can also hurt how they feel about themselves. For example, students who stop going to events might start to feel really alone because they are not around other people as much. When people feel alone like this, they might start to avoid events even more which can make it even harder for them to be around other people as seen in the work of Holt-Lunstad and other researchers, in 2015.

It is very important to understand these differences so we can see how stress from studies affects the way young adults connect with others. We also need to understand this to make plans that help students deal with the things around them and their own behaviours that affect how they interact with people.

People who are worried about learning feel alone and do not want to be around others. The Transactional Model of Stress and Coping which Lazarus and Folkman made in 1984 says that stress is something that can change and happen when people think about and react to the things that are expected of them. In schools students are always looking at challenges, like tests and homework and thinking about what they need to do. They do this based on how they think they can handle these things. People can become highly stressed out when such challenges seem hard to solve. This may have an impact on their emotions and behaviour in social settings. For example, they might not want to talk to their friends much. The

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Transactional Model of Stress and Coping is important because it helps us understand how stress affects learning and the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping can help us find ways to make learning less stressful. From an ecological perspective, environmental systems such as family, peers, and institutional settings also influence how students experience and respond to academic stress (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). However, opportunities for social interaction are reduced by academic stress, by limiting access to social support systems. Research suggests that students as discussed by Cohen & Wills, 1985, Social Support Theory focuses on the protective role of relationships in buffering the negative effects of stress. Emotional reassurance and guidance from peers, teachers and family members can help individuals manage the challenges faced experiencing social isolation are more into experiencing social withdrawal and emotional difficulties when faced with academic stressors (Thoits, 2011).

There are models which tell people to avoid social gatherings so that they can escape perceived emotional dysregulation, pressure and evaluation (Rubin et al., 2009). In academic settings, experiencing high stress results in withdrawing from social settings as a strategy to conserve emotional energy. Whereas, avoiding behaviour provides short-term relief and also prolonged withdrawal leads to increased isolation and mental distress. Altogether, these models highlight how cognitive appraisal, coping mechanisms and social supports contribute to relationships between academic stress and social disconnection. Moreover, there is a substantial amount of empirical research which has explored what exactly is the connection between academic stress and social functioning in adults. Also, there are educational settings which suggests that higher levels of academic stress are somewhat related to decreased social participation and a greater likelihood of loss of close connections. For instance, Misra and McKean (2000) have discussed that higher levels of academic stress among college students were linked with emotional misadjustment and isolating oneself from social activities.

The connection between social exclusion and academic strain was also addressed. From practical research, students who are under a lot of stress to study effectively and have an intense schedule may intentionally cut off socializing so as to focus on their studies (Kausar, 2010). Symptoms of loneliness have been related with decreased participation in activities outside of school and less social relationships. Based on some studies, an absence of social contact might erode the supportive social networks that are essential for managing stress, thus starting a vicious cycle where stress feeds isolation, which in turn feeds stress (Cacioppo & Hawkley, 2009).

Many studies have also looked into the link between socially isolated behaviours and academic stress. Based on research, students who have difficulty intellectually or who have a fear of getting a poor grade may isolate oneself in society as a coping mechanism for coping with their emotional stress (Rubin et al., 2009). Prolonged social disengagement, however, is linked to decreased life satisfaction, reduced wellbeing, and increased depression. Additionally, research indicates that social disconnection and academic stress may be associated in both directions, i.e., social withdrawal and isolation can increase stress by restricting access to positive interactions (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015).

According to the findings of the literature study, academic stress is a severe psychological concern for emerging adults, particularly within higher education settings where academic competition and high expectations are prominent. Emerging adulthood is a vital phase of growth that requires changes to society and professional commitments, which may make one

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more prone to stress-related diseases (Arnett, 2000). When educational needs surpass imagined coping methods, academic stress results, hampering students' social and emotional functioning (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Early researches indicate that academic stress is a multidimensional phenomenon determined by bivariate practices such as: class pressure, study load, time management and institutional environment (Misra & McKean, 2000; Bedewy & Gabriel, 2015). It has been found that high academic stress among students is related to low social engagement; because of it, it may lead to social isolation and withdrawal behaviours (Kausar, 2010). Social isolation is passive, in that you have less social contact, but withdrawal is active as one avoids making contact (Rubin et al., 2009).

Theories such as the Transaction Model of Stress and Coping, and Social Support Theory describe mechanisms by which academic stress adversely affects social disconnection via cognitive appraisal, coping strategies, and less access to supportive relationships (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Despite the large number of studies on stress phenomena, interactions of academic stress with social isolation or social withdrawal among emerging adults in Indian settings are not adequately addressed (Deb et al., 2015). All things considered, the literature offers a solid framework for investigating the connection between social separation and academic stress. Additionally, research on student adjustment highlights that academic and social integration within institutions plays a crucial role in buffering stress and preventing withdrawal behaviours (Tinto, 1993).

Research Gap

Although academic stress has been widely studied in relation to anxiety, depression, and academic performance, its direct association with social isolation and social withdrawal has received comparatively less focused investigation. Most existing studies examine emotional distress outcomes without deeply exploring how stress influences social behaviour.

Another limitation in the literature is that social isolation and social withdrawal are often treated as interchangeable constructs. However, isolation refers to reduced social contact, while withdrawal involves active avoidance of interaction. The lack of distinction between these variables creates a conceptual gap that needs clearer examination.

Additionally, much of the available research has been conducted in Western contexts, with limited emphasis on students in competitive academic systems where performance pressure is intense. Cultural expectations, family involvement, and examination-oriented education systems may uniquely shape stress experiences and social behaviour patterns.

Finally, emerging adulthood as a distinct developmental stage has not always been separately analyzed in stress-related social research. This study attempts to address these gaps by examining academic stress specifically in relation to both isolation and withdrawal among emerging adults.

Findings

1. Higher levels of academic stress were significantly associated with increased feelings of loneliness among students.
2. Students experiencing excessive academic workload reported reduced participation in social activities.

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3. Academic pressure from parents, teachers, and competitive environments contributed to emotional exhaustion and social disengagement.
4. Time management difficulties and procrastination were positively related to perceived academic stress and withdrawal behaviours.
5. Students with high academic stress showed a greater tendency to isolate themselves intentionally to focus on studies.
6. Social isolation was found to reduce access to peer support systems, thereby increasing psychological distress.
7. Social withdrawal acted as a short-term coping mechanism but was associated with long-term emotional discomfort.
8. A negative relationship was observed between academic stress and social interaction frequency.
9. Students who perceived low social support experienced higher levels of stress and loneliness.
10. Fear of academic failure contributed to avoidance of peer interaction and reduced classroom participation.
11. Institutional factors such as competitive grading systems and unclear evaluation methods intensified stress levels.
12. Prolonged academic stress was linked with reduced life satisfaction and decreased emotional well-being.
13. Students reporting higher stress levels demonstrated lower confidence in maintaining interpersonal relationships.
14. Loneliness and isolation were found to further intensify academic stress, suggesting a cyclical relationship.
15. Emerging adults facing academic stress showed difficulty balancing academic responsibilities with social and personal life domains.

Future Implications

1. Educational institutions should incorporate stress management programs alongside academic training.
2. Counselling services should monitor social withdrawal patterns among academically stressed students.
3. Future research may examine moderating factors such as social support, resilience, and coping styles.
4. Longitudinal studies could explore long-term effects of academic stress on social development.

CONCLUSION

The present study highlights the significant relationship between academic stress, social isolation, and social withdrawal among emerging adults. The findings suggest that excessive academic pressure may contribute to reduced social interaction and intentional disengagement from peers during a critical developmental stage.

Addressing academic stress requires a holistic approach that considers both academic and psychosocial dimensions of student life. Promoting balanced academic expectations and supportive social environments may help protect students from long-term emotional and social difficulties.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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