

Research Paper

Psychological Dimensions of Academic Stress among the Students of Higher Secondary School

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ABSTRACT

In the recent years, academic pressure has risen in higher secondary education which has cast doubts on the effect that such pressure has on the psychological well-being of the students. At this age group, adolescents are likely to encounter performance pressure, cutthroat academic experiences, and career ambiguities, and these reasons can make them experience emotional pain. The objectives of the study were to identify the academic stress levels in higher secondary school pupils and to establish the correlation between academic stress and the main psychological aspects such as anxiety, depressive and self-esteem. The descriptive survey cross-sectional correlational research design was chosen. The sample was 400 higher secondary students who were sampled using stratified random sampling. They were standardized tools (Among them, there was an Academic Stress Scale, Beck Anxiety Inventory (BAI), Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, and a Depression Scale (PHQ-9/BDI). Descriptive statistics, independent samples t-test, Pearson correlation, and regression were used as the methods of data analysis. The results showed that most students had moderate to high academic pressure. There were also important gender differences where female students were reported to experience more stress and psychological distress. There were significant positive relationships between academic stress and anxiety, depression and a negative correlation between academic stress and self-esteem. The regression model showed that academic stress was a significant predictor of psychological outcome as it explained a significant percentage variance in anxiety, depression, and self-esteem. The paper identifies academic stress as one of the key psychological risk factors in teenagers.

Keywords: *Academic stress, Adolescents, Psychological well-being, Anxiety, Higher secondary students*

Academic stress is the mental discomfort caused by the demands of education that are beyond the adaptive ability of the person. It is caused by different factors including exams, academic overload, academic time schedule, parental pressure and peer competition. Although moderate stress might stimulate students to work harder, chronic and extreme stress on academic performance has adverse consequences on emotional balance, cognitive abilities, and well-being. The period of late adolescence especially the higher secondary stage is one of great developmental transition. The student is exposed to a rapid change in biological, cognitive, emotional, and social aspects at the same time that there is an accumulation of the academic requirements on the student. This is the point when the people

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Assessment of Love Addiction and Its Relationship with Nomophobia

are yet to master the coping mechanisms, emotional control and self-concept and hence are more susceptible to the effects of stress leading to psychological issues. Academic pressure over an extended period in this delicate period of development can cause anxiety, depressive symptoms, low self-esteem and inability to emotionally adjust.

Academic stress is also increased in the Indian educational system because the stakes involved in higher secondary education are high. Students are under a lot of pressure in terms of board exams, entrance exams to professional courses, the society to achieve excellence in academics, and the fear about their future career. The competitive aspects of higher education institution admissions and career programs tend to cause students to undergo strenuous studying habits, coaching courses, and performance measurements, and this can increase the level of psychological pressure. Although there is growing awareness of the mental health of students, in most school systems, academic performance is still given more importance than the emotional well-being of students. Considering these issues, it is necessary to learn the psychological effect of academic stress in students of higher secondary. Determining the associations between academic stress and emotional issues like anxiety and depression and protection through self-esteem may assist educators and policymakers to develop effective interventions to promote adolescent mental health.

Psychological aspects of Academic Stress

The psychological implications of academic stress are multidimensional, and they play a major role in influencing the mental health of the adolescent and their academic performance. Anxiety is one of the most widely documented effects and it takes the form of excessive worrying, nervousness and fear about exams, academic performance and future prospects. Constant academic stress may result in the increased level of anxiety, which deteriorates attention skills and decision-making processes.

The other crucial psychological dimension that is linked to the extended academic stress is depression. The feelings of hopelessness, lack of motivation, and emotional withdrawal can be manifested in students under continuous pressure. Academic stress can in extreme cases lead to depressive symptoms which disrupt normal functioning and studies. Academic stress is also a contributor of emotional instability which is manifested in mood swings, irritability, frustration and emotional exhaustion. Teenagers constantly strained with academic performance might not be able to control their emotions, which results in more susceptibility to mental distress.

Self-esteem is also very important in the way students perceive and react to academic challenges. Academic stress has been known to be accompanied by low self-esteem especially where the self-worth of students is judged based on the performance of students. Academic failures or the fear of failure may bring down the confidence and self-image of students after repeated failures.

Amongst students who are stressed, sleep disturbances are also commonly reported such as difficulty sleeping, poor sleep quality, and abnormal sleeping patterns. Students respond to academic pressures, studying at night and/or being anxious about exams disrupt their healthy sleeping patterns, and this, in turn, leads to increased emotional and cognitive problems. Lastly, cognitive overload alternates when the academic requirements are more than what the students can process. Compromised attention and memory and problem-solving skills may be caused by excessive assignments, multitasking and constant pressure during performance,

Assessment of Love Addiction and Its Relationship with Nomophobia

making the academic stress worse and lowering the efficiency of learning, thus deteriorating the performance.

Rationale of the Study

It has been observed that in the recent years, mental health issues among students have been on the rise especially at the higher secondary level. An increase in academic demands, the intensity of competitive education, and societal demands have increased the levels of stress, making the mental health of adolescents a rising issue in the domain of the social order.

Although considerable literature is already available on academic stress, the surveys have not been conducted regionally and specifically focusing on a population, particularly in the context of Indian higher secondary education. The difference in socio-economic status, education systems, and cultural demands require local research to gain a deeper insight into the psychological experiences of students.

Moreover, psychological profiling is urgently required with the aim of facilitating early detection and treatment. The fact that academic stress has a connection with such psychological aspects as anxiety, depression, and self-esteem may assist educators, school counselors, and policymakers in developing specific mental health initiatives. The early intervention measures are able to lower the risks of the psychological health problems in the long term and encourage more healthy academic and emotional growth among teenagers.

Objectives of the Study

- To determine the amount of academic stress in higher secondary students.
- To measure psychological aspects related to academic stress.
- To investigate gender variations in academic stress.
- To examine how academic stress is related to psychological well-being.

Hypotheses

H01: The academic stress among the male and female students does not differ significantly.

H02: It does not exist that academic stress and anxiety are significantly related.

H03: Academic stress is not a major predictor of psychological well-being.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

According to Ghatol (2017), academic stress in higher secondary school students was reviewed, with the findings showing that high academic expectations, parental expectations, and stress due to examinations are great contributors to the level of stress to students. The paper has highlighted the adverse impact of stress on mental health and academic achievements of students.

Zhong and Ren (2009) examined how academic stress is correlated to psychological distress where they found the psychological capital as a key mediating variable. Their results indicate that more optimistic, resilient, and self-efficacious students are less psychologically distraught despite the academic stress.

Bedewy and Gabriel (2015) created and tested the Perception of Academic Stress Scale (PASS) to assess the perceptions of students to academic stress and its causes. Their output offered a valid instrument and disclosed that academic requirements, workload, and tests are the main stressors among university students.

Assessment of Love Addiction and Its Relationship with Nomophobia

Reddy, Menon, and Thattil (2018) studied the academic stress and its causes among higher education students and found that academic work load, time management problems and performance pressure were the significant causes. It was also demonstrated in the study that emotional difficulties were strongly linked with academic stress.

Selian, Hutagalung, and Rosli (2020) investigated academic stress, coping mechanisms, and adaptation to the sociocultural environment among Indonesian postgraduate students. Their findings suggested that coping strategies and enhanced social cultural adjustment correlated with the improved psychological well-being.

The study by Gupta (2020) aimed to examine psychosocial effects of academic stress among college students in the COVID-19 lockdown. Increased levels of stress associated with uncertainty, online learning issues, and low social engagement were found in the study, and it was emphasized that people should have psychological support in case of a crisis.

Chacon-Cuberos et al. (2021) hypothesized a structural framework that links the elements of the basic psychological needs, emotional control, and academic stress among the university students. The results showed that the satisfaction of psychologically needy people and improved emotional regulation has a significant effect on alleviating academic stress.

The study by Cinar-Tanriverdi and Karabacak-Celik (2023) has considered psychological need satisfaction and academic stress, and the mediating factors were grit and academic self-efficacy. The research showed that the students who were more persevering and confident about their academic skills had lesser levels of stress.

Identified Research Gaps

- The lack of context-specific study on the academic stress among various higher education institutions especially in the developing world.
- Excessive focus on the stress levels measurement without much examination of the psychological processes behind them.
- Absence of cohesive models which integrate various psychological protective variables (e.g., emotional regulation, self-efficacy, resilience, grit).
- Cross-sectional designs are mostly used, which limits knowledge about the changes in academic stress over time.
- The lack of analysis of academic stressors unique to the discipline in various areas of study.
- Scarcity of studies on long term academic and psychological consequences of sustained academic stress.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The current research followed a descriptive survey design which is a cross-sectional correlational research. This design was found to be suitable because this will make it possible to evaluate academic stress systematically and its association with psychological conditions like anxiety, depression, and self-esteem at one time. The correlational framework allows establishing the relationship between variables without controlling the study environment.

Population and Sample

The study population was the students in higher secondary schools (Class XI and XII) who studied in the recognized educational establishments. The study was chosen on a sample of 400 students. A stratified random sampling method was utilized in order to have sufficient representation in terms of academic stream and gender. This approach contributed to the reduction of sampling bias and enhances the external validity of the results in the populations being defined.

Tools Used

The data collection was done using standardized and widely accepted instruments of psychology:

Academic Stress Scale - A standardized scale used to determine the intensity and the causes of academic stress among the students. The internal consistency across the previous studies is reported to be good with most of the values of Cronbach alpha being over 0.80, which means that the reliability is satisfactory. The scale has proved to be content and construct valid among students.

Beck Anxiety Inventory (BAI) - A 21-item self-report inventory, which was developed to assess the level of anxiety symptoms. Internal consistency (a [?] 0.90) and convergent validity with other measures of anxiety have been demonstrated to be high.

Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES) - This is a 10 item scale used to measure global self-worth. The instrument is highly validated and it has good reliability (a ranging between 0.77-0.88) and high construct validity.

Depression Scale (PHQ-9 / Beck Depression Inventory) - A standardized instrument that assesses the level of depression. PHQ-9 and BDI have demonstrated good psychometrics and the reliability coefficients are generally over 0.80 and criterion validity is established.

Variables

- Independent Variable: Stress of academics.
- Dependent Variables: Anxiety, depression, self- esteem, and emotional well-being
- Demographic Variables: Gender, academic stream and family background.

Data Collection Procedure

Formal consent of school authorities had been taken before data was collected. Both students and their parents/guardians were informed and their consent was obtained. The participants were made aware of the study objective and reassured that they could participate in the study voluntarily. Strict ethical protection was upheld such as confidentiality, anonymity as well as the right to exit at any point. Administering of the questionnaires was done in a classroom environment under the supervision of the researcher to create standard conditions.

Statistical Techniques

The gathered data were interpreted under the fitting statistical procedures. The summary of academic stress and psychological variables levels was summarized using descriptive statistics, such as mean and standard deviation. A gender difference test was conducted by the use of an independent samples t-test. The correlation analysis done by Pearson was aimed at

Assessment of Love Addiction and Its Relationship with Nomophobia

establishing the relation between academic stress and psychological outcomes. Moreover, regression analysis was conducted in order to evaluate the predictive value of academic stress on anxiety, depression and self-esteem.

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

This section will give the statistical analysis of the data gathered in the higher secondary school students to test the levels of academic stress and its correlation with psychological variables, including anxiety levels, depression levels and self-esteem. The results are provided in a descriptive and inferential statistics in the form of frequency distribution, t-tests, correlation analysis and regression analysis. The patterns, differences, and relationships of the study variables are clearly illustrated with the help of tables and figures.

Table 1: Level of Academic Stress among Students (N = 400)

Level of Academic Stress	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Low	92	23.0%
Moderate	198	49.5%
High	110	27.5%
Total	400	100%

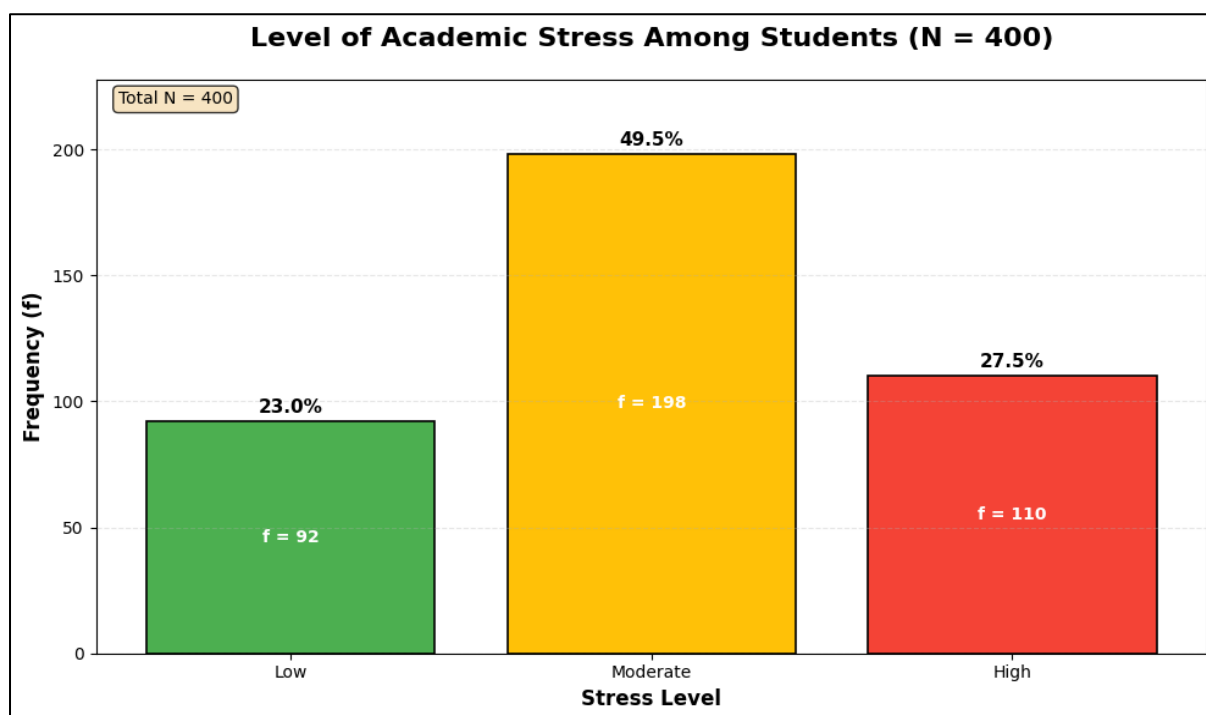


Figure 1: Distribution of low, moderate, and high academic stress levels.

Interpretation:

Table 1 reveals that around 50% of the students (49.5) had moderate level of academic stress and another group (27.5) experienced high levels of stress. The sample size of the low-stress group was only 23% which implies that academic stress is high among students in higher secondary level. The majority of students experienced moderate stress (49.5%), high (27.5) and low (23.0) stress were uncommon.

Assessment of Love Addiction and Its Relationship with Nomophobia

Table 2: Gender Differences in Academic Stress and Psychological Variables

Variable	Gender	Mean	SD	t-value	p-value
Academic Stress	Boys	58.42	10.31	2.45	0.015*
	Girls	61.87	9.88		
Anxiety	Boys	17.20	8.14	2.98	0.003**
	Girls	20.11	7.95		
Depression	Boys	15.76	7.60	2.10	0.036*
	Girls	17.89	7.44		
Self-Esteem	Boys	21.54	4.32	-2.72	0.007**
	Girls	19.86	4.57		

*p < 0.05, **p < 0.01

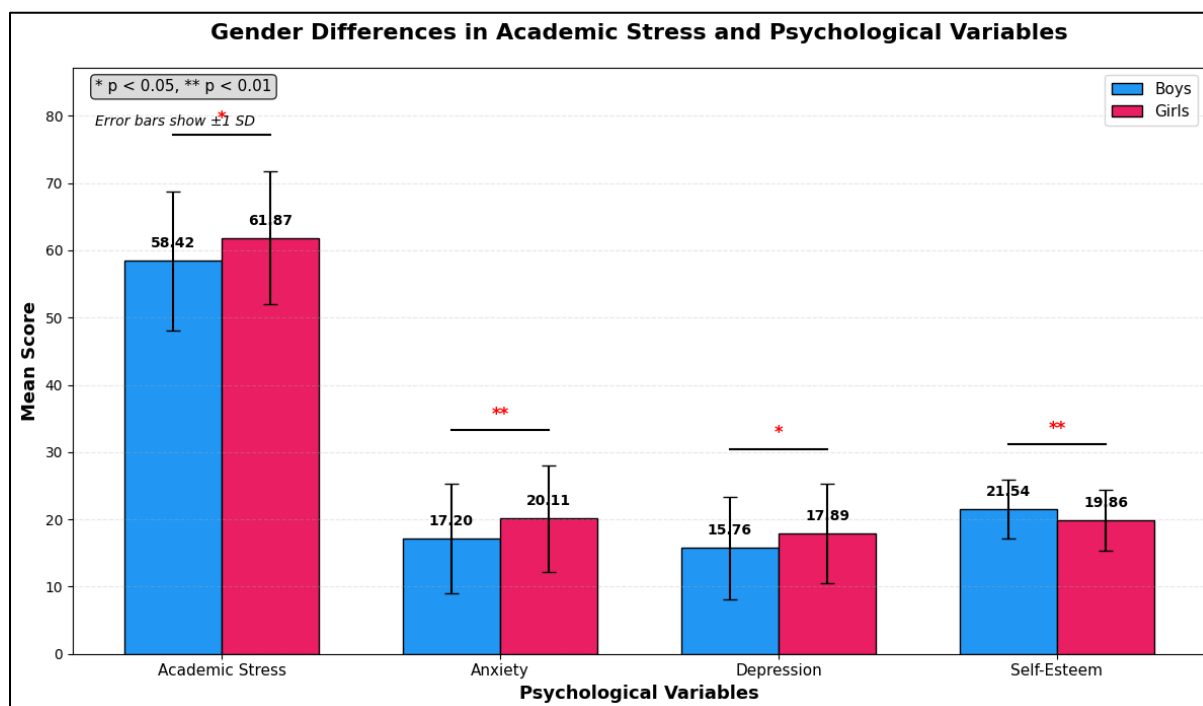


Figure 2: Mean scores of boys and girls across variables.

Interpretation:

There were great gender disparities. Girls were more stressed, more anxious, and more depressed in terms of academic, and boys had more self-esteem. This can imply that the academic pressure could have a psychological impact on female students. Girls scored significantly higher than boys on academic stress, anxiety and depression and boys had significantly higher self-esteem(p<.05, *p<.01).

Table 3: Correlation Matrix between Academic Stress and Psychological Variables

Variables	1	2	3	4
1. Academic Stress	1			
2. Anxiety	0.62**	1		
3. Depression	0.58**	0.65**	1	
4. Self-Esteem	-0.49**	-0.53**	-0.57**	1

p < 0.01

Assessment of Love Addiction and Its Relationship with Nomophobia

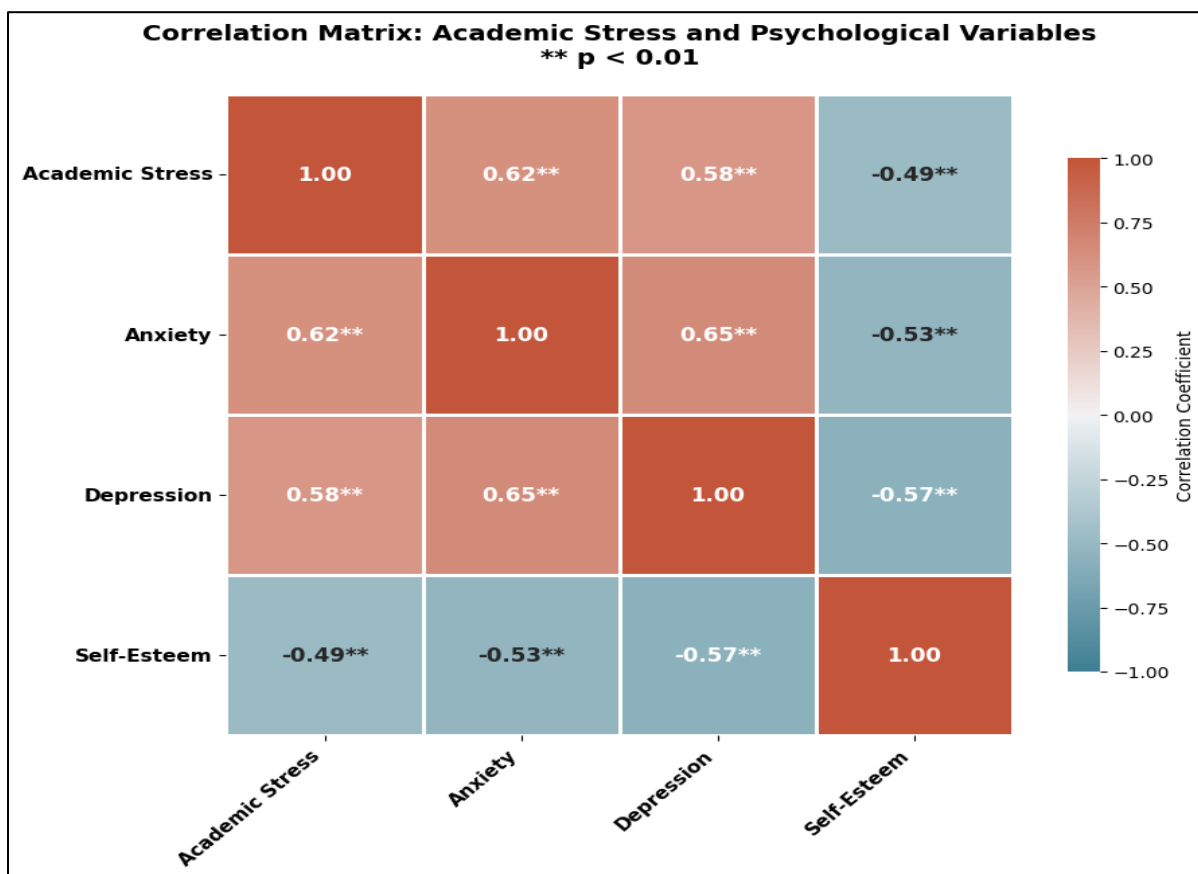


Figure 3: A heatmap visually represent the relationships.

Interpretation:

There was a positive attitude in the relationship between academic stress and anxiety ($r = 0.62$) and depression ($r = 0.58$), which revealed that the more stress is experienced, the more psychological distress. Academic stress and self-esteem had a moderate negative relationship ($r = -0.49$), which implies that higher levels of stress are associated with lower levels of self-worth. There were moderate positive correlations between academic stress and anxiety ($r = 0.62$), depression ($r = 0.58$), and a moderate negative correlation with self-esteem ($r = -0.49$).

Table 4: Regression Analysis Predicting Psychological Outcomes from Academic Stress

Dependent Variable	B	SE	Beta	t-value	p-value	R ²
Anxiety	0.48	0.05	0.62	9.60	<.001**	0.38
Depression	0.44	0.06	0.58	8.21	<.001**	0.34
Self-Esteem	-0.31	0.05	-0.49	-6.78	<.001**	0.24

p < 0.01

Assessment of Love Addiction and Its Relationship with Nomophobia

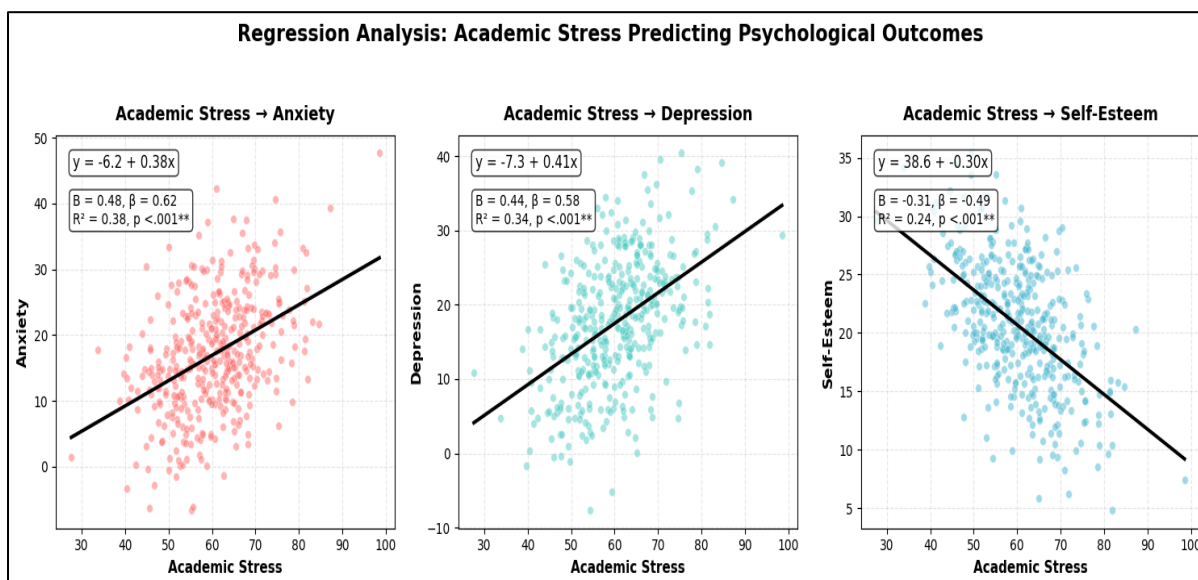


Figure 4: Predictive relationship between academic stress and each psychological variable

Interpretation:

The regression analysis found that academic stress had a significant influence on predicting anxiety ($b = 0.62$), depression ($b = 0.58$) and self-esteem ($b = -0.49$). Anxiety, depression, and self-esteem variance in students were explained by the academic stress at 38, 34, and 24 percent, respectively, which means that it has a powerful impact on their psychological well-being. Individual scatterplots with regression lines reveal that the predictive value of academic stress on anxiety ($B=0.48, R^2=.38$), depression ($B=0.44, R^2=.34$) and self-esteem ($B=-0.31, R^2=.24$) are significant ($p=.001$).

DISCUSSION

The current research paper was looking at the amount of academic stress in higher secondary school students and its correlation with anxiety, depression and self-esteem. The results show that a significant percentage of the students report moderate to high rates of academic stress, suggesting the increasing psychological impact of academic stress at the higher secondary level.

The descriptive findings indicated that almost a quarter of the students had moderate to high levels of stress. This confirms the perception that academic pressure, expectations of performance and competition in educational settings have a major impact on the mental well being of adolescents. The observation supports the fears that academic stress is not a single phenomenon but it is a common experience among the school going children. By comparing the genders it was determined that the academic stress, anxiety and depression were rated as significantly higher among female students compared to their male counterparts, whereas self esteem was more common in male students. These results include the possibility that girls are more emotionally susceptible to academic pressure, perhaps because of the greater expectations of themselves, the society, or because of the variations in coping styles. The reduced self-esteem experienced by girls is also a pointer that academic stress can have a more potent effect on their self-image and integration on the emotional front.

The correlation analysis revealed that academic stress had positive and strong positive relations with anxiety and depression as well as a moderate negative relation with self-

Assessment of Love Addiction and Its Relationship with Nomophobia

esteem. This implies that with the height of academic stress, students have high chances of developing psychological distress and low self-esteem. The results align with the theoretical knowledge that the persistent academic stress may damage emotional stability and have a harmful effect on the mental health of adolescents.

Regression analysis also established that academic stress has a high degree of predictability to psychological outcomes. The role of academic stress in anxiety, depression, and self-esteem variance was quite significant, and it was underlined as the key factor in the formation of emotional well-being in students. The prognostic power of scholarly strain points to the fact that it is not just related to distress, but it can be one of the causes of the emergence of emotional problems in students.

In general, the results point to the necessity to detect and treat academic stress at an early age in schools. Schools and other learning institutions need to incorporate psychological support networks, stress management courses as well as counseling services to enable students to acquire adaptive coping mechanisms. Another role that a teacher and parent can take towards creating the favorable academic environment that diminishes the undue stress and fosters the positive self-image is also essential.

CONCLUSION

The current research gives a clear indication that academic stress causes serious psychological threats to school students of higher secondary, which increases the level of anxiety and depression and lowering self-esteem. These results indicate that there is a critical necessity to screen mental health at a young age in school environments to recognize the students who are vulnerable to stress before it transforms into bigger emotional challenges. The findings also underscore the importance of teachers and policy-makers in ensuring that students have conducive academic learning environments, incorporating mental health programs in schools, and setting up policies that would not harm the academic performance of students at the expense of their psychological health.

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Assessment of Love Addiction and Its Relationship with Nomophobia

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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