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Research Paper

Academic Interest and Mental Health among College Students: The Mediating Role of Stress

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ABSTRACT

The current study aimed to examine how academic interest is related to mental health among college students and whether stress serves as a mediating mechanism in this relationship. The study sample consisted of 170 college students (100 males and 70 females) took part in the study through a purposive sampling method from colleges in the Varanasi district of Uttar Pradesh. The information was gathered using standardized and self-developed instruments and analyzed using correlation, multiple regression, and mediation techniques. The results revealed that students with stronger academic interest generally experienced lower levels of stress and better mental health. In contrast, higher stress levels were linked to poorer mental health outcomes. Regression analysis also demonstrated that both academic interest and stress significantly predicted mental health, with stress emerging as the stronger predictor. Mediation analysis revealed that stress partially explained the relationship between academic interest and mental health. Overall, the results suggest that higher academic interest is linked to better mental health both directly and indirectly through reduced stress levels. The study is limited by its cross-sectional design, reliance on self-report measures, and restricted generalizability. Future study may benefit from longitudinal designs and more diverse samples to strengthen the findings.

Keywords: *Academic Interest, Mental Health, Stress, College Students, Mediation Analysis*

Education is instrumental in in human life as it contributes to the intellectual, emotional, and social development of individuals. It is considered a persistent effort that supports people in develop knowledge, skills, values, and resilience needed for effective living (Age, Knowledge and Its Nature, 2000). Higher education institutions significantly support students' academic development as well as overall personality growth. College life is a crucial stage where students undergo various academic, emotional, social, and psychological changes that directly affect their learning and well-being.

Mental health is a critical element affecting students' academic progress and overall functioning. According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 1948), it refers to a condition in which individuals are able to recognize their abilities, manage everyday stress,

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work effectively, and contribute to society. Good mental health enables people to manage difficulties in a balanced and productive manner (Department of Health, 2001). However, studies show a growing number of mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, and emotional distress among young people (Patel et al., 2012). Globally, about one in seven adolescents' faces mental health problems (WHO, 2021). In India, factors such as academic pressure, parental expectations, and socio-economic challenges contribute to student stress and psychological difficulties (NCRB, 2021; Kumar & Sahu, 2022). Poor mental health can reduce concentration, motivation, decision-making ability, and academic achievement.

Stress is another major factor that affects students' psychological and academic well-being. It is defined as a physical and psychological reaction that occurs when individuals feel that environmental demand is greater than their ability to cope (Altmaier, 1983). Stress can appear in emotional, behavioral, and physical forms that influence overall functioning (Bruce, 2009). College students often struggle with stress arising from examinations, heavy workload, competition, time pressure, and career-related uncertainty (Baqutayan et al., 2012; McKean et al., 2000). Although a certain level of stress can motivate students, excessive stress negatively affects learning, concentration, and mental health (Pryjmachuk & Richards, 2007; Robotham & Julian, 2006).

Academic interest refers to students' internal motivation, curiosity, and active involvement in learning activities. It encourages participation, persistence in academic tasks, and better learning outcomes (Renninger & Hidi, 2002). Research indicates that academic interest enhances engagement, academic achievement, and future career development (Harackiewicz et al., 2018; Totouka, 2021). However, it may decrease due to repetitive teaching methods, high academic pressure, and lack of supportive learning environments (Harackiewicz et al., 2018).

Academic interest, stress, and mental health are closely connected. Students with higher academic interest generally experience better emotional involvement and lower stress levels, whereas stress negatively affects both mental health and academic functioning. Individuals with strong motivation are usually more capable of handling stress and maintaining psychological well-being (Renninger & Hidi, 2002; Robotham & Julian, 2006).

Although, existing literature has examined academic interest, stress, and mental health separately, limited research has explored how academic interest affects mental health through stress as a mediating factor, especially in the Indian context (Renninger & Hidi, 2002; Schaufeli et al., 2002). While stress is widely recognized as an important predictor of mental health, its role as a mediator in this relationship is still not sufficiently studied (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Stallman, 2010). In addition, most existing research is based on Western populations, which may not fully represent the experiences of Indian students facing different academic and cultural pressures (Dyrbye et al., 2006; Patel et al., 2012).

Given these considerations, it is important to evaluate stress as a potential mediator between academic interest and mental health within the Indian college student population.

Hence, the present study titled **"*Academic Interest and Mental Health among College Students: The Mediating Role of Stress"*** aims to explore the relationship between academic interest and mental health, along with the mediating role of stress among college students. The findings are expected to help educators, counselors, and policymakers in improving academic engagement and supporting students' psychological well-being.

METHOD

Participants

The present study included participants selected through purposive sampling. The research utilized data from college students studying in different colleges and universities located in the Varanasi district of Uttar Pradesh. A total of 230 students aged between 17 and 20 years were initially contacted for participation. After removing incomplete and invalid responses, the final sample consisted of 170 students, including 100 males and 70 females. The participants belonged to varied socio-economic and demographic backgrounds. The average age of the participants was 18.34 years (SD = 0.85).

Measures

Along with demographic information such as age, gender, socio-economic status, family background, and educational details, the following standardized and self-report instruments were used for data collection:

- **Educational Interest Scale (Self-Developed)**: The Educational Interest Scale was designed to assess students' level of interest in academic activities. It measures aspects such as curiosity, motivation, classroom participation, and engagement in learning tasks. The instrument contains 20 items, with responses recorded on a 5-point Likert scale with total scores between 20 and 100. A higher score reflects a greater extent of academic interest, while lower scores reflect reduced interest in studies. The instrument exhibited strong reliability, with a Cronbach's alpha value of .801.
- **Student Stress Inventory (SSI; Arip et al., 2020)**: To measure stress among college students, the Student Stress Inventory was utilized. It includes four dimensions: perceived stress, interpersonal relationship stress, academic stress, and environmental stress. The instrument is based on a 4-point Likert scale (1–4). In the present study, the scale demonstrated satisfactory reliability and validity, with a Cronbach's alpha value of .789.
- **Mental Health Battery (MHB-SS; Singh & Gupta, 2000)**: The Mental Health Battery developed by Singh and Gupta (2000) was used to measure students' mental health. It is suitable for individuals aged 13–22 years and assesses six dimensions, including emotional stability, adjustment, autonomy, security–insecurity, self-concept, and intelligence. The battery consists of 130 items. In this study, the overall reliability of the scale was good (Cronbach's alpha = .840).

Procedure

Data was taken from colleges and universities located in the Varanasi district of Uttar Pradesh. Before participating, individuals were informed about the aim of the study and gave their consent. They were also told that their involvement was voluntary and their responses would remain confidential.

The questionnaires, including demographic information, the Educational Interest Scale, the Student Stress Inventory, and the Mental Health Battery, were administered in both group and individual settings. Participants were instructed to respond honestly, with no strict time limit imposed. The assessment took approximately 25–35 minutes to complete. After data collection, incomplete responses were removed, and the final dataset was prepared for statistical analysis using correlation, multiple regression, and mediation techniques.

RESULT

Table 1. Means, Standard Deviations and Pearson Correlations among the Variables (N = 170)

Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3
1. Educational Interest	128.57	11.54	—		
2. Stress	108.10	13.57	-.42**	—	
3. Mental Health	127.55	18.25	.48**	-.61**	—

Note: *p < .01*

Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations, and Pearson correlations among educational interest, stress, and mental health. Educational interest was negatively correlated with stress ($r = -.42$, $p < .01$) and positively correlated with mental health ($r = .48$, $p < .01$). Stress was negatively correlated with mental health ($r = -.61$, $p < .01$), indicating that higher levels of stress were associated with poorer mental health.

Table 2: Results of Multiple Regression (Simultaneous) Analysis among Variables

Predictor	Criterion (Mental Health)
	β
Educational Interest	.21**
Stress	-.56***
R	.67
R Square	.45
F	67.28***

Note: Standardized Beta (β) is reported in the table.
*p < .01, **p < .001*

A regression analysis using the simultaneous entry method was implemented to analyze the predictive effects of educational interest and stress on mental health. The overall model was significant, $F(2, 167) = 67.28$, $p < .001$, explaining 45% of the variance in mental health ($R = .67$, $R^2 = .45$). Educational interest significantly and positively predicted mental health ($\beta = .21$, $p < .01$), whereas stress significantly and negatively predicted mental health ($\beta = -.56$, $p < .001$). Stress emerged as the stronger predictor of mental health.

An analysis of the mediating effect of stress on the link between educational interest and mental health.

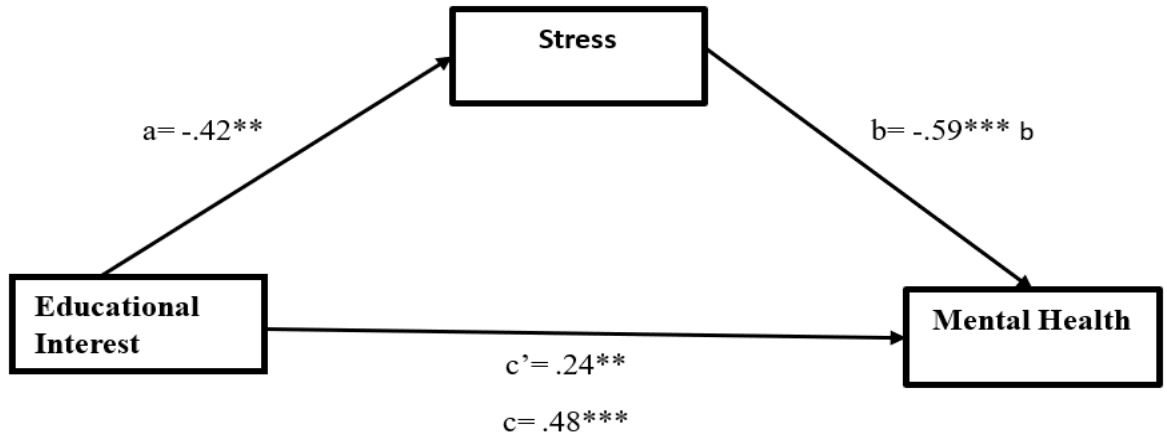


Figure 1: Indirect effect of Educational Interest on Mental Health through stress; Note ***p< .001

Table 3. Summary of an analysis of the mediating effect of stress on the link between educational interest and mental health.

Relationship	Total effect	Direct effect	Indirect Effect	Confidence interval		t-statistics	Conclusion
				Lower bound	Upper bound		
Educational Interest -> Stress-> Mental Health	.482***	.238**	**.**244***	.129	.376	4.18	Partially Mediated

To examine whether stress mediates the relationship between educational interest and mental health, a mediation analysis was conducted. The results are presented in Table 3 and Figure 1.

The findings revealed that the total effect of educational interest on mental health was significant ($\beta = .482$, $p < .001$). After including stress as a mediator, the direct effect of educational interest on mental health remained significant ($\beta = .238$, $p < .01$). The results further revealed a significant indirect effect of educational interest on mental health through stress ($\beta = .244$, $p < .001$). The 95% confidence interval (.129–.376) excluded zero, supporting the significance of the mediation pathway.

The t-value of 4.18 further confirmed the significance of the indirect effect. As both the direct effect and indirect effect were significant, stress was found to partially mediate the relationship between educational interest and mental health. These findings suggest that educational interest influences mental health both directly and indirectly through its impact on stress levels.

DISCUSSION

This research focused on the relationships between educational interest, stress, and mental health among college students, particularly highlighting stress as a mediator. he results demonstrated significant associations among all variables, consistent with the proposed mediation framework.

The analysis showed that educational interest was inversely related to stress and positively related to mental health. In contrast, stress was negatively correlated with mental health, meaning that higher stress levels are linked to reduced psychological well-being. These findings are consistent with earlier studies highlighting academic engagement as a protective factor for mental health, while stress functions as a major risk factor (Schaufeli et al., 2002; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Dyrbye et al., 2006).

Further regression analyses indicated that educational interest and stress were both significant predictors of mental health. A positive association was observed between educational interest and mental health, suggesting that students who are more interested and involved in their studies generally experience better psychological well-being. In contrast, stress was found to be a stronger negative predictor, demonstrating a more substantial impact on mental health outcomes. These results align with earlier research, which has consistently identified stress as a major contributor to psychological difficulties among students (American College Health Association, 2018; Stallman, 2010).

The mediation analysis provided additional insight by confirming that stress partially explained the relationship between educational interest and mental health. This indicates that part of the positive effect of educational interest on mental health occurs through reduced stress levels. However, since the direct effect remained significant, it suggests that educational interest also influences mental health through other psychological mechanisms such as motivation, engagement, and self-regulatory processes. Thus, stress acts as an important but not exclusive pathway in this relationship.

Overall, the results suggest that enhancing students' educational interest may contribute to improved mental health both directly and indirectly by reducing stress levels. The results suggest the importance of creating supportive, student-centered academic environments and implementing stress management strategies to promote psychological well-being among college students (WHO, 2022; UNESCO, 2021).

Limitations, Implications, and Future Research Directions

The study is subject to a few limitations that should be noted while interpreting the results. The cross-sectional design of the study restricts the ability to draw causal inferences among educational interest, stress, and mental health. In addition, the use of self-report instruments may have introduced response biases. The sample was drawn only from college students in the Varanasi region, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other populations. Moreover, the study did not consider other important psychological variables such as coping styles, social support, or personality characteristics, which may also play a role in mental health.

While these limitations are noted, the study nonetheless offers meaningful theoretical and practical contributions. The findings reinforce the significance of stress as a mediating factor between educational interest and mental health. This suggests that students with higher academic interest may experience better mental health partly because they experience lower levels of stress. Practically, the results highlight the need for educational institutions to encourage academic engagement while also providing adequate stress management programs and psychological support services to enhance student well-being.

Future research should overcome these limitations by using longitudinal or experimental designs to better understand causal relationships among the variables. It would also be beneficial to include larger and more diverse samples from different regions to improve external validity. Further studies may also incorporate additional variables such as coping mechanisms, resilience, emotional intelligence, and social support. Advanced statistical approaches like moderated mediation models may also help in providing a deeper understanding of the complex interactions among these factors.

CONCLUSION

The study examined relationships among educational interest, stress, and mental health in college students, with stress acting as a mediator. The findings indicated a positive relationship between educational interest and mental health, a negative relationship between educational interest and stress, and a negative relationship between stress and mental health. Both factors significantly predicted mental health, with stress showing the stronger influence.

The results also confirmed that stress partially mediates the relationship between educational interest and mental health. Overall, the study concludes that higher educational interest is

associated with better mental health directly and indirectly through reduced stress, highlighting the importance of promoting academic engagement and managing stress in college students.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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