Experiences of Academic Stress and Coping Mechanisms in High-Achieving Students

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A r t i c l e   I n f o

A B S T R A C T

The primary objective of this study was to explore the experiences of academic stress and the coping mechanisms employed by high-achieving students. The research aimed to identify key sources of stress, understand how these students manage their stress, and evaluate the impact of stress on their academic performance and overall well-being. This qualitative study utilized semi-structured interviews to collect data from 21 high-achieving students at a prestigious university. Participants were selected based on their high academic performance and involvement in extracurricular activities. Data analysis was conducted using NVivo software, following a thematic approach to identify recurring themes and patterns. Theoretical saturation was achieved, ensuring comprehensive coverage of the participants' experiences. The study identified several key sources of academic stress, including high expectations, heavy workload, time management challenges, peer competition, and lack of resources. Coping mechanisms employed by students included effective time management strategies, seeking social support, engaging in self-care practices, obtaining professional help, and making academic adjustments. The impact of academic stress was profound, affecting students' mental and physical health, academic performance, social relationships, personal development, motivation, and sleep patterns. The findings align with existing literature, highlighting the complex nature of academic stress and the diverse coping strategies used by students. High-achieving students experience significant academic stress due to various sources, which can negatively impact their well-being and academic performance. However, effective coping mechanisms and support systems can mitigate these effects. Institutions should develop comprehensive support systems, provide adequate resources, and foster a supportive academic environment to help students manage stress. Further research is needed to explore the role of individual differences and to develop targeted interventions for reducing academic stress among high-achieving students.
Keywords: academic stress, high-achieving students, coping mechanisms, qualitative study, mental health, time management, social support, academic performance.

1. Introduction

Academic stress can be defined as the body's response to academic-related demands that exceed the adaptive capabilities of students (Eslami et al., 2023; Marzeh Haji Aghayi et al., 2023; Morento, 2024). High-achieving students, often characterized by their exceptional performance and involvement in extracurricular activities, face unique stressors that can exacerbate their stress levels. These stressors include high expectations from themselves and others, a heavy workload, time management challenges, peer competition, and lack of resources (Basith et al., 2021). The pressure to maintain high academic standards and achieve outstanding results can lead to significant stress, impacting their overall health and academic success (Amah et al., 2022; Amah et al., 2021).

High expectations from various sources, such as parents, teachers, and the students themselves, contribute significantly to academic stress. According to Zimmer-Gembeck (2023), parental pressure and support play a crucial role in shaping adolescents' coping strategies and stress levels. High-achieving students often internalize these expectations, leading to increased self-imposed standards and stress (Zimmer-Gembeck, 2023). The scholarship requirements and institutional expectations further add to this pressure, making it difficult for students to balance their academic and personal lives (Baqutayan, 2011).

The academic workload is another critical source of stress. Students frequently report feeling overwhelmed by the sheer volume of assignments, projects, and exams they must manage (Basith et al., 2021). This workload can be particularly challenging for high-achieving students who often take on additional academic responsibilities, such as research projects and advanced coursework (Amah et al., 2021). The constant demand to perform at a high level can lead to burnout and decreased academic performance (Amah et al., 2022).

Time management is a significant challenge for many students, contributing to their stress levels. Procrastination, scheduling conflicts, and balancing academic commitments with personal and extracurricular activities are common issues (Park & Youngshim, 2018). High-achieving students, in particular, may struggle to find time for relaxation and self-care, further exacerbating their stress (Mukesh et al., 2022). Effective time management strategies are essential for mitigating these stressors and enhancing students' well-being and academic performance (Alah et al., 2018).

Peer competition is another prevalent source of stress among high-achieving students. The competitive academic environment can create a sense of rivalry and pressure to outperform peers (Cherkil et al., 2013). This competitive atmosphere can lead to feelings of inadequacy and increased stress levels, particularly when students compare their achievements to those of their peers (Vestad & Tharaldsen, 2021). The desire to excel and maintain a top position in the class can drive students to push themselves beyond their limits, resulting in significant stress and anxiety (Baqutayan, 2011).

Inadequate resources and support further contribute to academic stress. High-achieving students often require access to advanced academic materials, guidance from faculty, and financial resources to succeed (Shdaifat et al., 2018). Limited access to these resources can hinder their academic progress and increase stress levels (Osman & Ahmed, 2021). Institutional support, including tutoring services, advisory meetings, and mental health programs, is crucial for helping students manage their stress and achieve their academic goals (Osman & Ahmed, 2021).

Coping mechanisms are essential for managing academic stress and maintaining well-being. High-achieving students employ various strategies to cope with stress, including time management techniques, social support, self-care practices, seeking professional help, and making academic adjustments (Park & Youngshim, 2018). Time management strategies, such as prioritization, to-do lists, and time blocking, help students organize their tasks and reduce stress (Alah et al., 2018). Social support from friends, family, and study groups provides emotional relief and a sense of community (Baqutayan, 2011).

Self-care practices, including exercise, meditation, and hobbies, are also effective in managing stress (Mukesh et al., 2022). Engaging in these activities helps students relax and recharge, improving their overall well-being (Morento, 2024). Seeking professional help, such as counseling services and therapy sessions, provides students with the tools and support needed to cope with stress effectively (Jahara et al., 2022). Academic adjustments, such as reducing course load, requesting flexible deadlines, and opting for pass/fail options, can also alleviate stress and enhance academic performance (Basith et al., 2021).

The impact of academic stress on students' mental and physical health, academic performance, social relationships, personal development, motivation, and sleep patterns is profound (Amah et al., 2021). High levels of stress can lead to anxiety, depression, and burnout, significantly affecting

students' mental health (Amah et al., 2022). Physical health issues, such as fatigue, insomnia, and headaches, are also common among stressed students (Basith et al., 2021). Academic performance may decline as students struggle to keep up with their workload and meet deadlines (Amah et al., 2021).

Stress can also impact social relationships, leading to isolation, conflicts with peers, and strained relationships (Cherkil et al., 2013). Despite these challenges, some students develop resilience, self-awareness, and stress management skills, which are valuable for their personal development (Zimmer-Gembeck, 2023). However, high levels of stress can decrease motivation, leading to a lack of drive and loss of purpose (Amah et al., 2022). Irregular sleep patterns, insomnia, and daytime drowsiness are common among students experiencing academic stress (Park & Youngshim, 2018).

Support systems play a crucial role in helping students cope with academic stress. Family support, including parental encouragement and sibling advice, provides emotional stability and motivation (Zimmer-Gembeck, 2023). Peer support through study buddies, peer mentoring, and collaborative learning fosters a sense of community and mutual aid (Cherkil et al., 2013). Institutional support, such as tutoring services, advisory meetings, and mental health programs, is vital for addressing students' academic and emotional needs (Osman & Ahmed, 2021). Online resources, including forums, educational websites, and virtual study groups, offer additional support and information (Shdaifat et al., 2018).

In conclusion, understanding the sources and impact of academic stress, as well as the coping mechanisms employed by high-achieving students, is essential for developing effective interventions and support systems. By addressing these factors, educators and institutions can enhance student well-being, academic performance, and overall success. This study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the experiences of academic stress and coping mechanisms among high-achieving students, contributing to the existing literature and informing future research and practice.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

This qualitative study aimed to explore the experiences of academic stress and coping mechanisms among high-achieving students. The research design was chosen to allow for an in-depth understanding of participants' personal experiences and perceptions. Data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews, providing flexibility for participants to share detailed narratives while ensuring that key topics were covered consistently across interviews.

Participants were high-achieving students from a range of academic disciplines at a prestigious university. High achievement was defined by a combination of high GPA (above 3.8 on a 4.0 scale) and involvement in extracurricular academic activities, such as research projects, academic clubs, or competitive scholarships. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to identify individuals who met these criteria and were willing to discuss their experiences.

Theoretical saturation was reached when no new themes or insights were emerging from additional data, indicating that the data collection process could be concluded.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Semi-Structured Interview

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews, which were conducted either in person or via video conferencing, depending on participants' availability and preferences. The interview guide included open-ended questions designed to elicit detailed responses about participants' experiences with academic stress and their coping mechanisms. Example questions included:

- Can you describe a time when you felt particularly stressed about your academic performance?
- What factors contribute most to your academic stress?
- How do you typically cope with academic stress?
- Can you share an example of a coping strategy that you found particularly effective or ineffective?
- Interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

2.3. Data analysis

Data analysis followed a thematic approach, facilitated by the use of NVivo software. The process began with familiarization, where transcripts were read multiple times to gain an initial understanding of the data. Coding was conducted in stages:

- Open Coding: Initial codes were generated based on significant statements and concepts related to academic stress and coping mechanisms.
- Axial Coding: Codes were grouped into categories that represented broader themes.

- Selective Coding: Key themes were identified and refined to develop a coherent narrative that addressed the research questions.

3. Findings and Results

The study included 21 high-achieving students from a prestigious university, representing a diverse range of academic disciplines. Among the participants, 12 (57%) were female, and 9 (43%) were male. The age of participants ranged from 18 to 24 years, with a mean age of 21 years. In terms of academic standing, 8 (38%) were sophomores, 6 (29%) were juniors, and 7 (33%) were seniors. Participants were enrolled in various majors, including STEM fields (11 students, 52%), humanities (6 students, 29%), and social sciences (4 students, 19%). Additionally, 15 participants (71%) reported being involved in extracurricular academic activities, such as research projects, academic clubs, or competitive scholarships.

Table 1

The Results of Qualitative Analysis

Categories	Subcategories	Concepts
Sources of Academic Stress	High Expectations	Parental Pressure, Self-Imposed Standards, Scholarship Requirements
	Workload	Homework Load, Project Deadlines, Exam Preparation, Research Requirements
	Time Management	Procrastination, Scheduling Conflicts, Balancing Commitments
	Peer Competition	Comparative Performance, Academic Rivalry, Group Competition
	Lack of Resources	Limited Access to Materials, Inadequate Guidance, Financial Constraints
Coping Mechanisms	Time Management Strategies	Prioritization, To-Do Lists, Time Blocking
	Social Support	Talking to Friends, Study Groups, Family Conversations
	Self-Care Practices	Exercise, Meditation, Hobbies
	Seeking Professional Help	Counseling Services, Therapy Sessions, Academic Advisors
	Academic Adjustments	Course Load Reduction, Flexible Deadlines, Pass/Fail Options
Impact of Academic Stress	Mental Health	Anxiety, Depression, Burnout
	Physical Health	Fatigue, Insomnia, Headaches
	Academic Performance	Grades Decline, Missed Deadlines, Dropout Risk
	Social Relationships	Isolation, Conflict with Peers, Strained Relationships
	Personal Development	Resilience, Self-Awareness, Stress Management Skills
	Motivation	Decreased Interest, Lack of Drive, Loss of Purpose
	Sleep Patterns	Irregular Sleep, Insomnia, Daytime Drowsiness
Support Systems	Family Support	Parental Encouragement, Sibling Advice, Family Activities
	Peer Support	Study Buddies, Peer Mentoring, Collaborative Learning
	Institutional Support	Tutoring Services, Advisory Meetings, Mental Health Programs
	Online Resources	Online Forums, Educational Websites, Virtual Study Groups

3.1. Sources of Academic Stress

High Expectations: High-achieving students often face immense pressure from various sources. One participant mentioned, "My parents expect nothing less than perfection, which can be overwhelming." Another student expressed that self-imposed standards were a significant stressor: "I set very high goals for myself, and failing to meet them causes a lot of anxiety." Scholarship requirements also add to the pressure, as one student noted, "Maintaining my scholarship requires a GPA above 3.8, which is constantly on my mind."

Workload: The academic workload is another significant source of stress. Students reported feeling overwhelmed by homework load, project deadlines, and exam preparation. One participant shared, "I sometimes have three or four major assignments due in the same week, which makes it hard to keep up." Research requirements for honors students or those involved in academic projects further contribute to this stress.

Time Management: Many students struggle with managing their time effectively. "Procrastination is my biggest enemy," one student admitted. Scheduling conflicts and balancing academic commitments with extracurricular activities and personal life also pose challenges. Another participant remarked, "It's hard to find a balance between school, work, and having a social life."

Peer Competition: High-achieving students often feel the pressure of comparative performance and academic rivalry. "Seeing my peers excel can be motivating, but it's also stressful because I feel like I need to keep up," one student said. Group competition in academic settings can also heighten stress levels.

Lack of Resources: Limited access to academic materials, inadequate guidance, and financial constraints were cited as significant stressors. One student explained, "Sometimes, I can't afford all the textbooks I need, which makes studying harder." Another noted, "There's not enough support from faculty to guide us through tough courses."

3.2. Coping Mechanisms

Time Management Strategies: Effective time management strategies such as prioritization, using to-do lists, and time blocking help students cope with academic stress. One participant shared, "Making a daily to-do list helps me stay on track and manage my time better."

Social Support: Social support from friends, family, and study groups plays a crucial role in coping. "Talking to friends who are going through the same thing really helps," one student said. Family conversations also provide emotional support and relief.

Self-Care Practices: Engaging in self-care practices such as exercise, meditation, and hobbies helps students manage stress. One student mentioned, "Exercise is my way to de-stress. It clears my mind and gives me energy." Meditation and hobbies like reading or playing music also provide mental relief.

Seeking Professional Help: Some students seek professional help through counseling services, therapy sessions, and academic advisors. "Going to therapy has been a game-changer for me," one participant revealed. Academic advisors also provide valuable guidance and support.

Academic Adjustments: Making academic adjustments such as reducing course load, requesting flexible deadlines, and opting for pass/fail options can alleviate stress. One student shared, "Taking one less course this semester really helped me manage my workload better."

3.3. Impact of Academic Stress

Mental Health: Academic stress significantly impacts students' mental health, leading to anxiety, depression, and burnout. "There are days when I feel so overwhelmed that I can't get out of bed," one student confessed.

Physical Health: Stress also affects physical health, causing fatigue, insomnia, and headaches. "I often get headaches and feel exhausted, even after a full night's sleep," a participant noted.

Academic Performance: Stress can negatively impact academic performance, resulting in grades decline, missed deadlines, and an increased risk of dropout. One student

shared, "I missed several deadlines last semester because I just couldn't keep up."

Social Relationships: Stress affects social relationships, leading to isolation, conflicts with peers, and strained relationships. "I often isolate myself when I'm stressed, which affects my friendships," one student admitted.

Personal Development: Despite the negative impacts, some students develop resilience, self-awareness, and stress management skills. "I've learned to be more resilient and manage my stress better," a participant reflected.

Motivation: Academic stress can decrease motivation, leading to a lack of drive and loss of purpose. "Sometimes, I just don't see the point in all this," one student expressed.

Sleep Patterns: Irregular sleep patterns, insomnia, and daytime drowsiness are common among stressed students. "I often stay up late studying and feel tired during the day," a student reported.

3.4. Support Systems

Family Support: Family support, including parental encouragement, sibling advice, and family activities, helps students cope with stress. One student mentioned, "My parents' support is crucial; they always encourage me to do my best."

Peer Support: Peer support through study buddies, peer mentoring, and collaborative learning provides a sense of community and mutual aid. "My study group keeps me motivated and accountable," one participant noted.

Institutional Support: Institutional support, such as tutoring services, advisory meetings, and mental health programs, is vital. "The tutoring center has been incredibly helpful for difficult subjects," a student shared.

Online Resources: Online resources, including forums, educational websites, and virtual study groups, offer additional support. One participant stated, "Online forums are great for getting quick help and connecting with others."

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study provide an in-depth understanding of the experiences of academic stress and the coping mechanisms employed by high-achieving students. The results highlighted key sources of stress, including high expectations, workload, time management challenges, peer competition, and lack of resources. Additionally, various coping mechanisms, such as time management strategies, social support, self-care practices, seeking professional help, and academic adjustments, were identified. These findings

align with previous research and offer insights into how high-achieving students navigate their academic environments.

High expectations emerged as a significant source of stress for high-achieving students. This finding is consistent with prior research that emphasizes the pressure students feel from parents, teachers, and themselves to meet high academic standards (Zimmer-Gembeck, 2023). The internalization of these expectations often leads to increased self-imposed standards and stress (Alah et al., 2018). Scholarship requirements and institutional expectations further amplify this pressure, making it challenging for students to maintain a balanced life (Baqutayan, 2011).

The academic workload was another prominent stressor identified in this study. High-achieving students often juggle multiple responsibilities, including coursework, research projects, and extracurricular activities. This heavy workload can be overwhelming and lead to burnout, as noted in previous studies (Amah et al., 2021; Basith et al., 2021). The constant demand to excel academically can detract from students' overall well-being and academic performance (Amah et al., 2022).

Time management challenges were also highlighted as a significant source of stress. Procrastination, scheduling conflicts, and balancing academic commitments with personal and extracurricular activities were common issues faced by the participants. These findings are supported by research indicating that effective time management is crucial for reducing academic stress and enhancing student well-being (Mukesh et al., 2022; Park & Youngshim, 2018).

Peer competition was identified as a prevalent source of stress among high-achieving students. The competitive academic environment fosters a sense of rivalry and pressure to outperform peers, which can lead to feelings of inadequacy and increased stress levels (Cherkil et al., 2013; Vestad & Tharaldsen, 2021). This competitive atmosphere can drive students to push themselves beyond their limits, resulting in significant stress and anxiety (Baqutayan, 2011).

Inadequate resources and support further contributed to academic stress. High-achieving students often require access to advanced academic materials, guidance from faculty, and financial resources to succeed. Limited access to these resources can hinder their academic progress and increase stress levels (Osman & Ahmed, 2021; Shdaifat et al., 2018). Institutional support, including tutoring services, advisory meetings, and mental health programs, is vital for helping students manage their stress and achieve their academic goals (Osman & Ahmed, 2021).

The study identified several coping mechanisms employed by high-achieving students to manage academic stress. Time management strategies, such as prioritization, to-do lists, and time blocking, were commonly used to organize tasks and reduce stress. These strategies are effective in helping students manage their workload and maintain a balanced life (Alah et al., 2018).

Social support from friends, family, and study groups was another crucial coping mechanism. Talking to friends who are going through similar experiences, participating in study groups, and engaging in family conversations provide emotional relief and a sense of community (Baqutayan, 2011). This finding aligns with previous research that highlights the importance of social support in mitigating academic stress (Morento, 2024).

Self-care practices, including exercise, meditation, and hobbies, were also effective in managing stress. Engaging in these activities helps students relax and recharge, improving their overall well-being (Mukesh et al., 2022). These findings are consistent with studies that emphasize the role of self-care in reducing stress and enhancing mental health (Park & Youngshim, 2018).

Seeking professional help, such as counseling services, therapy sessions, and academic advisors, was another coping mechanism identified in the study. Professional support provides students with the tools and guidance needed to cope with stress effectively (Jahara et al., 2022). This finding supports previous research that underscores the importance of professional help in managing academic stress (Amah et al., 2022).

Academic adjustments, such as reducing course load, requesting flexible deadlines, and opting for pass/fail options, were also employed to alleviate stress. These adjustments allow students to manage their workload better and focus on their well-being (Basith et al., 2021). This finding is supported by research indicating that academic flexibility can significantly reduce stress and improve academic performance (Osman & Ahmed, 2021).

The impact of academic stress on students' mental and physical health, academic performance, social relationships, personal development, motivation, and sleep patterns was profound. High levels of stress can lead to anxiety, depression, and burnout, significantly affecting students' mental health (Amah et al., 2022; Amah et al., 2021). Physical health issues, such as fatigue, insomnia, and headaches, were also common among stressed students (Basith et al., 2021).

Academic performance may decline as students struggle to keep up with their workload and meet deadlines (Amah et al., 2021). Stress can also impact social relationships, leading to isolation, conflicts with peers, and strained relationships (Cherkil et al., 2013). Despite these challenges, some students develop resilience, self-awareness, and stress management skills, which are valuable for their personal development (Zimmer-Gembeck, 2023).

High levels of stress can decrease motivation, leading to a lack of drive and loss of purpose (Amah et al., 2022). Irregular sleep patterns, insomnia, and daytime drowsiness were common among students experiencing academic stress (Park & Youngshim, 2018). These findings underscore the need for effective coping mechanisms and support systems to mitigate the negative impact of academic stress on students' well-being and academic success.

Despite the valuable insights provided by this study, there are several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the study's qualitative design, while providing in-depth understanding, may limit the generalizability of the findings. The experiences of the 21 high-achieving students in this study may not represent the broader population of high-achieving students across different institutions and cultural contexts. Second, the reliance on self-reported data through interviews may introduce bias, as participants might underreport or exaggerate their stress levels and coping mechanisms. Third, the study did not account for potential confounding variables such as personality traits, socioeconomic status, and prior mental health conditions, which could influence the experiences of academic stress and coping strategies.

Future research should consider a larger and more diverse sample to enhance the generalizability of the findings. Including students from various academic disciplines, institutions, and cultural backgrounds can provide a more comprehensive understanding of academic stress and coping mechanisms. Longitudinal studies that track students' experiences over time would also be beneficial in identifying changes in stress levels and coping strategies throughout their academic careers. Additionally, quantitative research that uses validated scales and surveys can complement qualitative findings and provide a broader perspective on the prevalence and impact of academic stress. Future studies should also explore the role of individual differences, such as personality traits and resilience, in moderating the relationship between academic stress and coping mechanisms.

The findings of this study have several practical implications for educators, institutions, and policymakers. First, institutions should develop and implement comprehensive support systems that address the various sources of academic stress identified in this study. This includes providing adequate academic resources, offering flexible academic policies, and ensuring access to mental health services. Educators should also be trained to recognize signs of academic stress and provide appropriate support and guidance to students. Encouraging the development of effective time management skills and self-care practices can help students manage their workload and reduce stress. Institutions should also foster a supportive and collaborative academic environment that mitigates peer competition and promotes social support among students. Finally, policymakers should consider the findings of this study when designing educational policies and interventions aimed at improving student well-being and academic performance.

In conclusion, this study provides valuable insights into the experiences of academic stress and the coping mechanisms employed by high-achieving students. By understanding the sources and impact of academic stress, as well as the coping strategies used by students, educators and institutions can develop effective interventions and support systems that enhance student well-being and academic success. Further research is needed to build on these findings and explore additional factors that influence academic stress and coping mechanisms.

Authors' Contributions

Authors contributed equally to this article.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

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