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A STUDY ON ANXIETY AND STRESS OF EXAMINATIONS AMONG HIGHER SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS

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Abstract

This study investigates the prevalence, causes, and effects of examination anxiety and stress among higher secondary school students. Academic pressure, parental expectation, peer competition, and future uncertainty are identified as major factors contributing to stress and anxiety. Using a mixed-methods approach with quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews, data were collected from 500 students across multiple schools. Results indicate that 78% of students experience moderate to high exam anxiety, which negatively impacts academic performance and psychological well-being. Coping strategies like time management and social support were found effective, whereas maladaptive responses such as avoidance and procrastination exacerbated stress. The research highlights the urgent need for interventions at school, family, and policy levels to safeguard students' mental health.

Keywords: Examination Anxiety, Stress, Higher Secondary Students, Academic Performance, Coping Strategies

1. Introduction

Education plays a pivotal role in shaping students' academic and career trajectories. Higher secondary education, typically encompassing grades 11 and 12, is a crucial transitional phase preceding tertiary education or employment. In many countries, including India, high-stakes examinations at the end of this stage determine college admissions and future opportunities. While these assessments aim to evaluate students' knowledge and skills, they also generate considerable psychological stress.

Exam anxiety and stress are widespread among adolescents, affecting their academic performance, emotional balance, and overall health. Defined as excessive worry, nervousness, and physiological symptoms in evaluative situations, exam anxiety can impair cognitive function (Spielberger, 1980). Stress, a broader construct, encompasses emotional and physical reactions to perceived academic demands exceeding coping resources (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Understanding the multifaceted nature of examination stress is vital. Despite growing research, few studies comprehensively examine the interrelationships between academic stressors, psychological responses, and outcomes among higher secondary students. This paper addresses this gap by analyzing determinants, manifestations, and coping strategies of exam-related anxiety and stress.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Definition and Prevalence of Exam Anxiety

Exam anxiety is conceptualized as a form of performance anxiety characterized by worry and tension in academic testing contexts (Zeidner, 1998). Research indicates prevalence rates vary but are generally high in secondary education. For instance, Putwain (2007) found that over 60% of British secondary students reported significant test anxiety.

In the Indian context, Sharma and Kaur (2015) reported that approximately 70% of higher secondary students experience examination stress, with girls showing slightly higher anxiety levels than boys.

2.2 Causes of Examination Stress

Several factors contribute to exam stress:



- **Academic Pressure:** The rigorous syllabus and competitive environment in higher secondary schools intensify pressure to excel academically (Singh & Singh, 2010).
- **Parental Expectations:** High expectations from parents regarding grades and future prospects amplify stress levels (Gupta & Singh, 2017).
- **Peer Competition:** Comparison with peers enhances competitive stress (Johnson et al., 2014).
- **Future Uncertainty:** Concerns about college admission and career paths contribute to anxiety (Kaur & Kaur, 2013).

2.3 Psychological and Physiological Effects

Short-term effects include headaches, sleep disturbances, irritability, and concentration problems (Owens et al., 2014). Long-term stress can lead to burnout, depression, and decreased academic motivation (Travers & Cooper, 1994).

2.4 Coping Strategies

Effective coping strategies include problem-focused approaches such as time management and seeking social support (Compas et al., 2001). Conversely, avoidance coping, such as procrastination and denial, worsens anxiety and performance (Sirois, 2014).

3. Objectives of the Study

The primary objectives of this research are:

1. To assess the level of examination anxiety and stress among higher secondary students.
2. To identify key factors contributing to examination stress.
3. To examine the effects of exam stress on academic performance and well-being.
4. To explore coping strategies used by students.

4. Research Questions

1. What is the prevalence of examination anxiety and stress among higher secondary students?
2. What are the main causes of examination stress?
3. How does examination anxiety affect students' academic performance?
4. Which coping strategies are most effective in reducing exam stress?

5. Methodology

5.1 Research Design

This study adopted a **mixed-methods design** combining quantitative and qualitative approaches. A quantitative survey provided measurable data on anxiety levels, while qualitative interviews offered deeper insights.

5.2 Participants

The sample consisted of **500 higher secondary students** (ages 16–18) from five schools in West Bengal, India. Participants included both science and arts stream students, representing a balanced gender distribution (52% female, 48% male).



5.3 Instruments

- **Test Anxiety Inventory (TAI):** Used to measure students' anxiety levels (Spielberger, 1980).
- **Perceived Stress Scale (PSS):** Assessed overall stress related to examinations (Cohen et al., 1983).
- **Semi-structured interviews:** Conducted with 30 selected students to explore subjective experiences.

5.4 Procedure

Data were collected during the pre-exam period. Students completed questionnaires in classroom settings. Interviews were conducted in a private setting to ensure confidentiality.

5.5 Ethical Considerations

Participation was voluntary, with informed consent obtained from students and guardians. Data were anonymized, and psychological support resources were provided.

6. Results

6.1 Quantitative Findings

6.1.1 Prevalence of Anxiety

Analysis revealed that **78% of students** exhibited moderate to high examination anxiety scores on the TAI. Only 22% reported low anxiety.

6.1.2 Levels of Perceived Stress

Perceived stress scores indicated that **65% of respondents** experienced high stress, with girls reporting slightly higher mean scores than boys ($p < .05$).

6.1.3 Correlation with Academic Performance

A statistically significant negative correlation ($r = -.48$, $p < .01$) was found between exam anxiety scores and recent test grades, indicating that higher anxiety corresponded to lower performance.

6.2 Qualitative Insights

Interview responses highlighted several thematic patterns.

6.2.1 Academic Pressure and Competition

Students described a relentless focus on grades, with one student stating:

“I feel I must always score high because my future depends on it. Falling short means letting everyone down.”

6.2.2 Parental Expectations

Many students reported pressure from parents:

“My parents compare me with my cousin who is always first in class. That makes me anxious.”



6.2.3 Fear of Failure

A common theme was fear of failure:

“I don’t just fear the exam; I fear disappointing my teachers and parents.”

6.2.4 Coping Strategies

Effective coping included:

- **Time management:** Creating realistic study schedules.
- **Peer support:** Studying in groups to reduce anxiety.

Maladaptive coping like procrastination and avoidance was also reported.

7. Discussion

The findings confirm that examination anxiety and stress are prevalent among higher secondary students. The high rates align with prior research, emphasizing that academic environments emphasizing high-stakes testing are inherently stressful (Putwain, 2007). The negative correlation between anxiety and performance supports the cognitive interference theory, which posits that intrusive worry undermines working memory and test performance (Eysenck et al., 2007).

7.1 Determinants of Stress

Consistent with existing literature, academic pressure and parental expectations emerged as dominant stressors. The cultural context of Indian education, where academic performance significantly influences socio-economic mobility, likely intensifies these pressures.

7.2 Effects on Well-Being

Both quantitative and qualitative data show that exam anxiety extends beyond academic outcomes; it also affects emotional well-being. Symptoms like sleep disturbances and obsessive worry reflect the psychological toll of prolonged stress.

7.3 Coping Strategies and Interventions

The research highlights that students’ coping strategies vary widely. Adaptive strategies like planning and social support were beneficial, while avoidance behaviors undermined confidence and readiness. This underscores the need for structured guidance in effective stress management.

8. Implications

8.1 For Schools

- **Mental health programs:** Schools should integrate stress management workshops and mindfulness training.
- **Counseling services:** Dedicated counselors can provide individualized support.
- **Assessment reforms:** Alternative evaluation methods could reduce undue emphasis on final exams.

8.2 For Parents

- Parents should promote supportive, rather than outcome-focused, engagement.

- Workshops for parents can increase awareness of healthy expectations.

8.3 For Policy Makers

- Education policies should prioritize student mental health.
- Investing in teacher training on psychological support strategies can improve school climate.

9. Limitations

Despite its contributions, this study has limitations:

1. **Cross-sectional design:** It captures a specific time point; longitudinal research could track changes over exam cycles.
2. **Self-report measures:** Responses may be influenced by social desirability.
3. **Regional focus:** The sample was limited to select schools in West Bengal; findings may not generalize nationally.

Future research should incorporate physiological measures (e.g., cortisol levels), larger national samples, and intervention trials.

10. Conclusion

Examination anxiety and stress are pervasive among higher secondary school students, significantly impacting academic performance and psychological health. Key stressors include academic pressure, parental expectations, and competition. While some students utilize adaptive coping strategies to mitigate stress, many continue to struggle with maladaptive responses. This study underscores the need for multi-level interventions involving schools, families, and policy initiatives to foster supportive educational environments.

Addressing exam anxiety is not only about improving grades but also about nurturing resilient, healthy adolescents capable of navigating academic and life challenges.

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