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## **Unheard Voices: A Qualitative Inquiry into Academic Stress and Emotional Challenges in Public Colleges**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Pakistan has a state-owned public college system that has a very limited set of resources, and therefore the stressors students face there have not been studied yet. This paper was set out with the aim of investigating the academic and emotional issues confronting students in colleges in these types of settings by trying to obtain lived experiences of students. The qualitative design was used where the purposively chosen students were interviewed using the semi-structured interviews. Theme analysis of the transcribed data revealed the formulation of three main themes, namely Academic Pressure in a Resource-Deprived Setting, The Emotional Toll of the Expectations of the Parents, and Fear of Failure and Social Shame, which were subsequently divided into two sub-themes. Outdated pedagogy, poor infrastructure, parental support under conditions, and academic failure as a stigma were identified as some of the main reasons why students experience any level of psychological pressure. The results indicate a sophisticated interaction of both systemic educational constraints together with sociocultural assumptions that lead to emotional burnout and deprivation of having access to psychological release. This research finds that institutional reshaping, teaching pedagogies, and psychological support networks are sorely lacking to combat the unnoticed emotional and academic pressures of the learners in the state colleges of Pakistan.*

**Keywords:** *Academic Stress, Emotional Wellbeing, Social Shame, Psychological Distress.*

## Introduction

The mental health conditions of students especially in underdeveloped regions and rural areas had started gaining importance throughout the world. Several studies have been reported where academic stress was found as a major contributor to a decline in the mental wellbeing of the students with the outcomes being anxiety and depression, sleep disturbances, and drop in academic performance (Pascoe et al., 2020; Turner et al., 2016). Nevertheless, the literatures that are available tend to focus more on learners in urban or resource-adequate learning environments, where supporting facilities like counseling, internet, and educational reforms are more accessible. Few studies exist which account for the emotional and cognitive demands of students who have to deal with structural marginalization of regions such as Khushab, a district in Punjab, Pakistan, which can be described as low socio-economic development regions, scanty education infrastructure and firm cultural pressures surrounding academic performance.

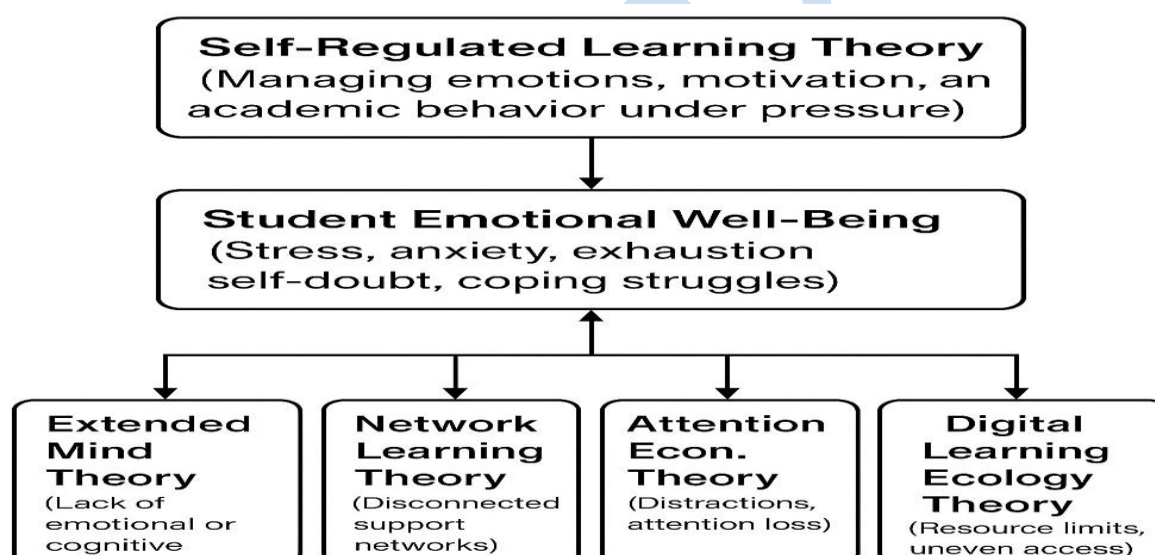
Recent research has drawn attention to the influence of academic pressure that increases the psychological pressure of students (Lin & Chen, 1995; Talley, 2024). However, these works do not always take into consideration the way this pressure is experienced differently in those settings where educational resources are limited and teaching methods are still based mostly on rote memory and exam-based teaching (Bashir, 2024). Students in these contexts not only find it difficult coping with academic demands but are also denied any means and mechanisms to deal with academic demands efficiently. Moreover, the literature on South Asian and Pakistani societies emphasizes situating the concept of family expectations, where education could be a way to get a social promotion (Shah et al., 2010). Nevertheless, there is little research on how these expectations, coupled with economic precariousness and strict social ideals become destabilizing constructs of emotion that breed guilt, fear of failure and authentic feelings of personal insufficiency.

Although not all scholars have, in fact, dismissed the notion of academic anxiety among students in Pakistan (Khan et al., 2021), the majority of the empirical studies do not focus on those experiences in terms of perspective in the perspective of the learners themselves, specifically those in the rural and disadvantaged environment. Although the proposed study holds the potential to fill in this gap, it will also answer the question of perception and internalization of the college stress by the college students in Khushab. The qualitative aspect of the study works according to the grounded reality and analyzes the emotional, cognitive and social aspects of the stress by considering the personal stories of students. The cumulative impact of all these stressors (academic pressure, parental expectations and fear of failure) amidst the backdrop of systemic neglect and cultural inflexibility is a story of too much hollow prosperity and success. The relevance of doing this study is rooted in the investment of the study to unmask voices that are ordinarily not included in academic researches. Even when not eliciting any policy consideration or global publication, rural students have an important impact when it comes to defining the way education systems can reinforce disparity and mental instability.

To ascertain some meaning out of such complex realities, the study is based on a multi-theoretical framework. The Extended Mind Theory (Tobin & Ritchie, 2012) can be considered valuable in this regard because it provides a pretext to comprehending the influence of external social structures (parental expectations, community scrutiny, institutional

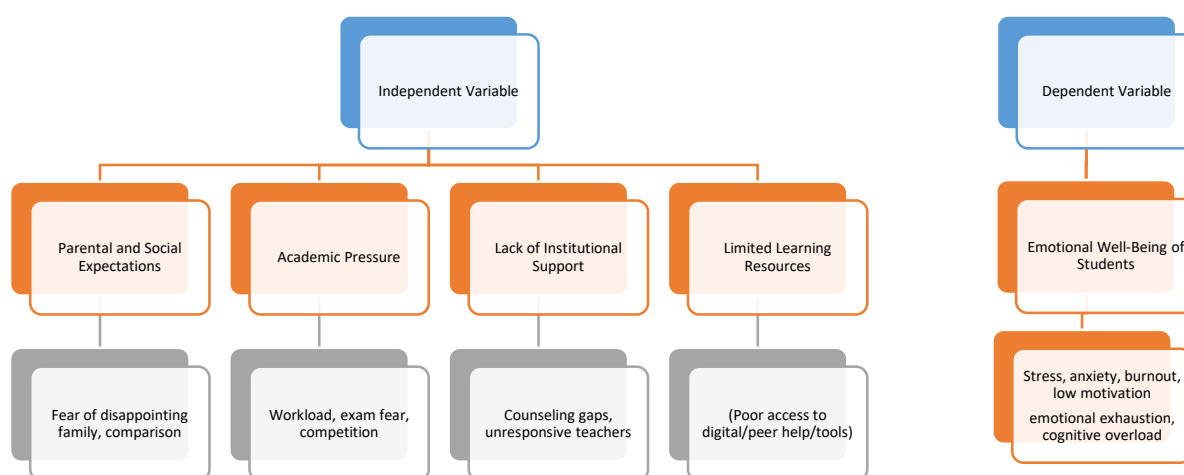
limitations, and so on) to not be regarded only as an environmental factor but as a vital element of the cognitive and emotional processing of students. Self-Regulated Learning Theory (Op't Eynde et al., 2007) is an opportunity to discuss the role of students in the measures that they take to regulate their behavior during a learning process as to their manner of emotional response and use of motivation strategies in an uncomfortable environment that does not offer feedback, flexibility or support (Linnenbrink-Garcia et al., 2016).

The Attention Economy Theory (Abadzi, 2006) goes further to explain how the students in resource-poor environments are so overburdened cognitively and need to subdivide the little attention on various academic, familial, and emotional responsibilities without access to tools to help them focus or develop clarity of thought. Also, Digital Learning Ecology Theory (Ydyrys et al., 2023) points to the fact that due to the lack of digital infrastructure in the province and technological support in Khushab, the more excluded these learners become, the less likely they are to receive exposure to other forms of learning, coping skills and academic progress.



**Figure 1 Theoretical framework**

To address this area of inquiry and guided by this theoretical framework, as well as findings from the literature and the empirical study, the study presents a conceptual framework where academic pressure, parental expectations, fear of failure, insufficiency of emotional support and institutional shortage of resources work as compound factors that are independent of academic performance of a student. Identified in the literature, as confirmed by the stories of the participants, those variables are presented as collectively affecting student outcomes by putting a stress on stress, emotional vulnerability, anxiety, and academic burnout, which are addressed as dependent variables. In the framework, structural blockers, social-cultural forces and college student psychological wellbeing have a dynamic and context particular love-making. It is this relationship that takes the center stage of analysis in the present study that aims to highlight the multifaceted emotional battles of the students within one of the most neglected education scenarios that are present in Pakistan.



**Figure 2 Conceptual Framework (Textual Format)**

### Objectives of the Study

- To identify the causes of academic pressure among students in underprivileged educational contexts in a situation where the educational system in under-resourced settings tends to experience failing teaching strategies and infrastructural weaknesses.
- To learn the emotional strain placed on students as a result of parental expectations especially when academic performance are not only tied to family well-being but are also but financially costly to their families.
- To analyze how fear of academic failure and the social judgment it elicits help to cause anxiety, emotional and avoidance behaviors among the students.
- To examine the impact of lacking institutional support in case of emotional needs and mental treatment on the possibility of students coping with academic and psychological pressure.
- To theorize on how academic, familial and structural stressors can relate to one another and affect emotional susceptibility, anxiety and academic burnout among students of disadvantaged backgrounds.

### Research Questions

1. What is the perception and experience of academic pressure of students in under-resourced educational settings on teaching quality and institutional support?
2. How do parental expectations influence the emotional wellbeing, self-worth and motivation of students, in academic settings?
3. What are the psychological effects of the fear of academic failure and judgment among peers on students of a school?
4. What are the effects of the inability of institutions to provide emotional support through services like counseling to students in their capacity to overcome academic stress?
5. What is the combined effect of academic, familial and structural stressors on the emotional vulnerability, anxiety and academic burnout in students?

### Methodology

In conducting this study, the paradigm under which we subscribe to the constructivist paradigm of qualitative research design was to help in capturing the lived experience of the students who were in a dilemma with their academic and emotional struggles in the less

resourced educational settings. A phenomenological strategy was chosen to gradually open up the domain of personal experiences by enabling the participants to describe the world through their own words, displaying the depth and dimensionality of their emotional truth. The sampling was done purposively (its purpose is to get information), and twelve college students took part in the study (different academic backgrounds and socio-economic states were recorded). They all were enrolled in undergraduate schools at the moment and showed their willingness to describe their academic and psychological troubles. The information was collected via semi-structured, in-depth interviews that were also conducted in Urdu and English as per the comfort of the participants. All the interviews took 30 to 60 minutes and were audio-taped after permission had been granted before being transcribed word by word to analyses them. Field notes were also kept in order to store the contextual and non-verbal information. Thematic analysis was performed with the model proposed by (Braun & Clarke, 2019) consisting of six stages, including repeating manual coding, determining the main patterns, and integrating key themes and sub-themes into the words of the participants directly. As a strategy to ascertain the validity of the findings, member checking, thick description and audit trail of coding and analytic decisions were utilized. An approval of the relevant institutional review board was attained, informed consent was provided by all participants, and every effort was used to ensure the participants were anonymous and confidentiality was maintained in the research process.

### Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis of the interviews with the students showed up three larger themes that speak about the psychological, emotional, and academic vulnerabilities of students in poor colleges of Khushab. The themes and sub-themes help back up the stresses that students themselves slowly put into words that speak to the finer details of the factors involved causing the stress like poverty, traditional family values and lack of support in institutions.

**Table of Thematic Analysis**

Theme	Sub-theme	Expanded Description with Participant Quotes
<b>1. Academic Pressure in a Resource-Deprived Setting</b>	<b>1.1 Outdated Teaching &amp; Unfair Evaluation Systems</b>	Students complained about the prevalence of rote learning and dictation style of instruction that did not focus on critical thinking. The examinations were termed as biased and relied on repetition not on knowledge. Our teachers simply dictate notes and no explanations. We learn it all out by heart like parrots." (P2) Sometimes I feel tests do not measure our knowledge levels but only ability to give what the teacher brainwashed us on." (P5)
	<b>1.2 Limited Study Resources and Infrastructure</b>	Students reported not having basic learning tools like access to the internet, libraries, or even peaceful classrooms. The physical settings were another problem that interfered with their focus and inspiration. In our college there is no internet. We have no proper classroom to learn anything. Not even when we are sitting in winter that there are cold benches and windows are broken down." (P4)
<b>2. The Emotional Toll of Parental Expectations</b>	<b>2.1 Conditional Acceptance Based on Performance</b>	Most of them indicated that family love was given only when a student did well in school. Emotional alienation by the parents usually followed a fall in grades. In case I



		come first then everybody back home is happy. "However, when I get second place, my mother does not talk to me several days long." (P1) "I feel that I am not a boy, I am a part of an investment." (P6)
	<b>2.2 Economic Sacrifice and Burden of Guilt</b>	Students knew the burden the education was causing the families and this gave stress and made one feel guilty. They were afraid of being a disappointment to the sacrifice made by their parents. My father sold one of his cows so I could get admission fees. (P8) I think about my younger siblings, so I want to stay. (P3)
<b>3. Fear of Failure and Social Shame</b>	<b>3.1 Shame as a Public Emotion</b>	Failure did not happen in isolation but rather brought about gossip and mockery by the community. This added to the stress of the students. Once the result is declared, people want to know your marks in the village. In the case of failure, they gossip at your back like you have committed a crime. (P9) I missed a whole week in college when I failed one subject because I could not face my peers and the teachers. (P2)
	<b>3.2 Lack of Emotional Outlets</b>	No such resources in the form of counseling or emotional support systems were available to students. Male students were discouraged to seek mental health support with their problems because it was viewed as a form of stigma. We even laugh when discussing mental stress among the teachers. (P10) When a boy mentions that he is stressed or anxious, he is termed as weak. (P6)

### Discussion

The results of this paper provide a more complex way of thinking about the patterns of academic stress experienced and internalized by students in under-resourced educational settings. Using the detailed case studies, the paper has exposed that academic demands, parental pressure, fear of failure, and the absence of institutional support all build a highly intertwined psychological maze. The stressors are not incidental as they are profoundly enshrined in the sociocultural realities and the structural factors which characterize academic life of students.

The first of the major themes, that of academic pressure in a deprived resource environment, outlines to us as to how students are overwhelmed by excessive academic expectations without the availability of modern pedagogy solutions and new age infrastructural facilities. Students described how they were subjected to rote learning, mechanics of assessment, and paucity of concept. This is in line with (Shujja et al., 2019) who determined that obsolete instructional methods have the huge potential of eliminating motivation and boosting academic stress among students in low-income areas of Pakistan. This pressure was also exacerbated psychologically by the fact that there was no digital access, limited classroom conditions, and overflowing schools, all of which hindered learning and emotional wellness. These results support the statements by (Zhao & Bilal, 2021) that academic demands put an additional strain on emotion, especially on groups of students already disadvantaged by the institution. This means that academic stress will continue to be a long-term mental burden without structural changes and innovations in pedagogy.

The second theme, the emotional burden of parental expectations presents the emotional life of students as subjected to their cultural norms on honor, success, and obedience. The participants explained their success in academics directly to the approval by the family that high grades were not only an accomplishment but also a prerequisite to acceptance and love. This is consistent with the findings of (Suhail et al., 2023) who state that academic performance is frequently perceived as the representation of moral condition in South Asian families. The sub-theme of financial sacrifice adds this complication to the dynamic- students have reported taking in guilt and anxiety over the economic sacrifices that their family members had to face to finance their studies. This data corroborates the arguments by (Pascoe et al., 2020) that emotional stress in students is considerably amplified when they view their inability to perform on the academic level as a violation of family trust and sacrifice. Here the academic performance is an emotional burden and not an individual desire which makes it more prone to psychological issues.

The third theme, fear of failure and social shame, demonstrates that the tightly-knit structure of community and strong collectivist values promote the academic outcomes as social issues. Some students described how they avoided school or social situations following a bad performance because of the fear of ridicule and judgment by peers, teachers and even people that they never even knew. Such external rhetoric about failure fosters ongoing anxiety because students unconsciously assume that failing in school is tantamount to being flawed as a person. These insights are akin to the observations of (Turner et al., 2016) who mentioned that the fear of social humiliation may be an even more pronounced psychological harm to collectivist cultures than the transcendent academic outcome. Safe emotional outlets were non-existent, which also enhanced this fear. A lot of learners admitted to being unwilling to talk about their emotional issues due to stigma, ridicule, or lack of compassion that may be presented by neighbors or teachers. This confirms the evidence revealed by (Khan et al., 2021), who found that students in Pakistan do not express emotions freely and because of any stigma attached to mental health in particular, the lack of expression makes people lonelier emotionally.

The overall results of the present research are invaluable concerning the Extended Mind Theory because it assumes a connection between cognition and emotion and external social-cultural and material surroundings (Chalmers et al., 2016). The judgment of parents, social demands, and institutional failure, in the given context, are nothing other than extensions of the cognitive-emotional systems of the students, which directly influence their mental conditions. Likewise, the reason why many respondents were not able to control their learning objectives and self-regulatory emotional reactions could be explained by the reference to the Self-Regulated Learning Theory, which states that there had been no scaffolding, feedback, and supportive regulation tools to support one learn under pressure (Zimmerman, 2017). The Attention Economy Theory (Citton, 2017) also shows that the mental capacities of students were overloaded due to the pressure of the other responsibilities and social image. Lastly, the Digital Learning Ecology Theory (Helsper, 2021) gives us evidence as to how psychological and academic inequalities that exist are compounded by systemic inequities in technology access and digital literacy, leaving rural students with a psychological and cognitive disadvantage.

These results are far-reaching second, they demand institutional changes other than what changes in curriculum may entail, which include investment in counseling services, sensitivity training on the part of the teachers, as well as emotional wellness plans. Second, they emphasize the necessity of introducing culturally responsive policies where whole families are involved in the conversation about undesired emotional side effects of academic pressure. Finally, the research indicates that any attempt to overcome academic stress in an underdeveloped setting will have to take a multidimensional approach to the problem, which means factoring emotional, cultural, economic, and institutional pressures on student wellbeing.

**Key Findings of the Study:**

- Academic pressure has greater stress due to structural disadvantages, which are characterized by outdated curricula, overfilled classrooms, and insufficient access to technology, which causes higher stress and emotional burnout.
- Parental expectations fulfil the same role as a two-edged sword that would motivate but at the same time become a heavy emotional burden on students, especially at the times when families go to financial extremes to ensure their education.
- The social shame related to the fear of academic failure, as the students feared that their peers, teachers, and the extended community will judge them thus leading to a withdrawal, anxiety, and self-blame.
- The inability to access emotional support institutionally is a contributing factor to the lack of emotional stability in students, where counseling services, mental health awareness, and psychologically secure areas to talk about mental health issues are all out of reach.
- Academic achievements are internalized by students as something that their value as a person is based on and the performance becomes an emotional currency in families and communities, at the expense of mental health.
- The part of the influence of external sociocultural pressures corresponds to the cognitive-emotional theories since not only internal student stress is defined by internal and intra-individual factors but also the extended environment, expectations, and systemic gaps.

**Conclusion**

The current work has demonstrated that academic stress, parental pressure and fear of failure have a traumatic impact on the emotional well-being of students in educational institutions that are under resourced. These stressors exist not in isolation but as a part of cultural norms, institutional inefficiency or inadequacies and economic issues. Students miss the presence of emotional support mechanisms which aggravates their pressurized psychological state to a point of anxiety, emotional repression, and burnout.

The focus on the generalized nature of educational stress by robbing it of all its hands-on-experience that is in line with theories such as the Extended mind theory and the Self-Regulated learning theory makes the study very spot on. The framework created has pointed out the influential effect of academic, family, and structural factors on student well-being, which requires the redesigning of student support by educational stakeholders, both emotionally and structurally.



## Limitations

Although this research can serve as a good source of information about the emotional and academic difficulties of students, the limitations of this study include the small population and the investigation is localized. Generalizability of the results may be the problem due to the use of purposive sampling technique and focus on one region. Moreover, given that the study only depended upon self-reports of the experiences, there might have been bias in terms of selective disclosure/recall. Further research can be conducted through wider geographical indication and integration of quantitative measurements to reestablish and complement these results.

## Recommendations

- The services of student counseling that have already been implemented in certain universities in Pakistan need to be provided in the generalized environment of colleges to provide students with a plan of emotional and psychological support.
- The parental awareness programs especially the programs aimed at the emotional and mental well-being of the students must be institutionalized by conducting orientation programs and local community participation programs to minimize the unrealistic stress out in the academic arena.
- New or refreshed training courses offered to faculty through current and available Continuous Professional Development (CPD) systems must offer modules in mental health responsiveness and empathetic communication to ensure creation of conducive academic climate.
- Peer mentorship programs, informally established in certain universities, need to be established formally in colleges to aid the efforts of students in coping with the academic pressure by providing them with the guidance based on the collective experience and emotional support.

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