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Impact of Academic Pressure and Career Uncertainty on Gen Z Burnout and Mental Well-being

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Abstract

There is a substantial concern regarding burnout among Generation Z (Gen Z), which is influenced by the dual pressures of academic demands and career uncertainty. This paper studies the interaction among these stressors and their effects on mental well-being through the use of empirical survey data of 99 university students. Findings are obtained from analyses of correlation and regression which demonstrate that academic workload, self/family expectations and perceived institutional support are important predictors of mental exhaustion, career related stress and feelings of hopelessness. Moreover, the moderating role of digital distractions is discussed and how they aid in increasing the severity of burnout symptoms is explored. It emphasizes the need for institutional interventions such as flexible academic structures, integrated mental health support and career counselling programmes to cushion the resultant mental toll on Gen Z students.

Keywords: *Generation Z, academic pressure, career uncertainty, mental well-being, digital distractions.*

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Introduction

Generation Z (Gen Z) is now facing the pressure of academic life and career uncertainty in their lives, resulting in the severe impacts on their mental well-being. Academically and career wise, this generation born between the mid-1990s to early 2010s is in pressing conditions that have a great impact on their psychological health (Moomal et al.,2009). Otherwise from parents, institutions and from the society, students are under the extreme academic stress all the time, which may result in burnout (Klassen & Chiu, 2010).

Students with burnout, which means students suffering from emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and lowered academic efficacy, have been described by many (Helms-Lorenz & Maulana, 2016). It has been reported that academic achievements is needed for better career progression, but too much stress in one's student life ultimately affects the students' mental well-being which consequently leads to anxiety, depression and weakens cognitive function (Klusmann et al., 2008).

Moreover, these problems are compounded by a career uncertainty that Gen Z will have to go through as it works in a volatile job market and conditions that are ever changing (Reeves et al., 2017). Due to the increasing demands of specialized skills, automation and artificial intelligence, students preparing for the workforce are having many concerns about where jobs will be in the future, stressing them about being left behind (Skaalvik&Skaalvik, 2011). The sense of helplessness ties in with underlying fear of unemployment, fear of underemployment, or simply job dissatisfaction which exacerbates the burnout (Zeffane, 2006). Along with others, it also affects students' long term career decisions and personal well-being (Sinha et al., 2013).

To aid in addressing well-being of Gen Z, it is important to understand the interplay of academic stress, career uncertainty and their mental health. Previous studies have separately studied these issues, and thus an integration of the two is necessary considering their combined effect on burnout and mental health (Ryan & Deci, 2020). This work outlines a way to review existing literature on such topics about theoretical perspectives and empirical findings that show academic and career pressures exert influence on Gen Z students.

Literature Review

Theoretical Perspectives on Academic Pressure and Career Uncertainty

Those (who are) disconnected from their career goals are already reported to suffer psychological distress thus leading to burnout (Mensah & Bawo, 2020).

In the same manner, it is concluded that Self Determination Theory (SDT) contends that autonomy, competence and relatedness are pivotal elements that give value to academic and career satisfaction (Ryan & Deci, 2020). The mental well-being of the students falls when they feel pressurized from the outside forces and are not intrinsically motivated. Results indicate that young students under excessive academic control and less career autonomy are more affected by higher levels of anxiety and disengagement (Kuntz, 2012).

Additionally, the Job Demand Control Model (JDC) identifies how excessive scholar demand and deficient choice making authority can cause burnout (Biemann et al., 2015). On most occasions, students who fail to control their academic workload and future career path are vulnerable to mental health issues since they feel overwhelmed.

Impact of Academic Pressure on Burnout and Mental Health

There are significant amount of academic pressure as predictor of burnout among students. It is researched that hectic academic demand of course work, regular assessment, and long hours of studying include cause chronic stress and exhaustion (Moomal et al., 2009). According to Klassen and Chiu (2010) a student with a high instructional self-efficacy reports less of burn out than students with low self-efficacy although they report high academic stress.

According to Helms Lorenz and Maulana (2016), students' mental well-being is affected when they have no ability to cope up with academic pressure. However, when exposed to stress over a long period, emotional exhaustion occurs, which is characterized by feeling tired, irritable and detached from their studies (Klusmann et al., 2008). Academic stress makes up an important part of a student's life, and 91% of the students complains about moderate to severe academic stress as per the 2014 international TALIS survey conducted by OECD (Zeffane, 2006).

Additionally, research indicates that classroom stress significantly impacts student satisfaction and mental health. While academic self-efficacy enhances motivation, classroom stress lowers job satisfaction and increases dropout rates (Skaalvik&Skaalvik, 2011). The role of educators is crucial in managing academic stress, as positive teacher-student relationships help mitigate burnout effects (Reeves et al., 2017).

Career Uncertainty and Its Psychological Impact on Gen Z

Career uncertainty has become a growing concern among Gen Z students, as evolving job markets and technological disruptions create instability

in career planning (Sinha et al., 2013). According to Kuntz (2012), career-related anxiety stems from fears of job insecurity, skill obsolescence, and intense competition. Students struggling to align their academic choices with evolving industry trends often experience heightened stress and decision paralysis.

The **Overqualification Theory** suggests that individuals who perceive their education exceeding job requirements experience dissatisfaction and mental distress (Maynard et al., 2006). Gen Z students, facing uncertainty about career prospects, often feel demotivated, leading to decreased academic engagement and increased burnout (Biemann et al., 2015).

Furthermore, research shows that career satisfaction plays a crucial role in reducing student anxiety. Studies indicate that students who receive career guidance and professional development opportunities report higher confidence levels and lower stress (Pandita & Ray, 2018). Universities that integrate career counselling and industry collaboration programs help students build career resilience, mitigating anxiety related to job uncertainty (Schalock&Felce, 2004).

The Role of Institutional and Social Support

Alleviation of academic and career stresses is very much dependent on institutional and social support systems. Today, universities all around the world are compelled to increase the research output and teaching effectiveness that directly impacts on the students' academic experiences (Sinha et al., 2013). As Kuntz (2012) suggests, to senior educators and school administrators, it is of the utmost importance that they find balance between academic rigor and student well-being.

Such academic burnout can be alleviated a lot if you had mental health resources, peer support groups, some flexible learning environments etc. As Rawn and Fox (2018) studied that stress management and academic performance of students with access to mental health counselling services are better. Furthermore, mentorship opportunities provide students with the opportunity to connect with industry professionals to bridge the gap between the academics and the workforce preparation (Ryan & Deci, 2020).

It is a concern of concern on how academic pressure and career uncertainty affects Gen Z's mental well-being. Klassen and Chiu (2010) further indicate that excessive academic demands are caused by burnout, emotional exhaustion, and reduced motivation. Additionally, stress from career uncertainty is aggravated by the inevitable uncertainty in the job market and the demands for different skills (Skaalvik&Skaalvik, 2011). The psychological effects of these stressors are explained by theories such as Person-Environment Fit, Self Determination, and Job-Demand Control.

In order to solve these issues, universities and policymakers must put into practice supportive academic and career counselling programs. As a step in reducing burnout and enhancing student well-being, mental health resources have to be provided, work life balance has to be promoted and career adaptability has to be fostered (Pandita & Ray, 2018). The future research should focus on the long term outcomes of academic and career stress in professional domain and also the interventions that would help Gen Z make a smoother entry in the workforce.

Research Gap

Although there is already a lot of literature on the individual impact of academic pressure and career uncertainty respectively, there is not much available which has looked at the combined effect on burnout and mental well-being from a cross cultural perspective. Conversely, the effect of digital distractions as a moderating factor for the relationship between emic and etic symbols has not yet received much attention. Therefore, it becomes necessary to have integrated studies to elucidate how these stressors affect each other to lead to burnout symptoms and mental health outcomes in Gen Z.

Research Questions

To address the identified research gap, the following questions are proposed:

1. How does academic pressure influence the mental well-being and burnout symptoms among Gen Z students?

2. What is the relationship between career uncertainty and stress levels in Gen Z students?

3. To what extent do academic and career-related stress factors contribute to burnout symptoms in Gen Z?

Methodology

This study adopts a quantitative research design, employing a structured survey to gather data from a sample of 99 university students. The survey instrument captured key variables, including perceived academic workload, self/family expectations, institutional support, and job market stability perceptions. Statistical analyses were conducted using SPSS to explore the relationships and predictive strength of these variables concerning burnout and mental well-being. Correlation analysis was employed to measure the strength and direction of relationships among variables, while multiple regression

analyses identified significant predictors of stress-related outcomes, such as mental exhaustion and feelings of hopelessness. Academic and career–related stressors were also studied in combination, as were digital distractions as a moderator. The approach of these methodologies offers a robust evidence on burnout and mental health of Gen Z students in the context of these complex dynamics.

Analysis

Question 1: Academic Pressure and Burnout

The problem of burnout among Generation Z students is caused by that academic pressure. This research explores how academic workload, familial expectations, and institutional factors are related to mental exhaustion and discuss mechanisms of mental burnout as a way to suggest effective strategies to mitigate burnout.

Correlations

		Perceived academic workload	Pressure from self/family expectations	Pressure from family expectations	Institutional support perception	Job market stability perception	Physical/mental exhaustion	Comfort discussing mental health	Detachment from studies	Lack of motivation for career	Hopelessness about managing stress
Perceived academic workload	Pearson Correlation	1	.389**	.243*	.359**	-.016	.390**	.348**	.384**	.450**	.493**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000	.016	.000	.874	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000
	N	99	99	99	99	99	99	99	99	99	99
Pressure from self/family expectations	Pearson Correlation	.389**	1	.484**	.330**	-.219*	.570**	.421**	.525**	.213*	.518**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		.000	.001	.029	.000	.000	.000	.035	.000
	N	99	99	99	99	99	99	99	99	99	99
Pressure from family expectations	Pearson Correlation	.243*	.484**	1	.376**	-.213*	.353**	.239*	.408**	.102	.358**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.016	.000		.000	.034	.000	.017	.000	.313	.000
	N	99	99	99	99	99	99	99	99	99	99
Institutional support perception	Pearson Correlation	.359**	.330**	.376**	1	-.081	.439**	.384**	.400**	.302**	.455**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.001	.000		.423	.000	.000	.000	.002	.000
	N	99	99	99	99	99	99	99	99	99	99
Job market stability perception	Pearson Correlation	-.016	-.219*	-.213*	-.081	1	-.163	-.082	-.183	.004	-.319**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.874	.029	.034	.423		.108	.420	.070	.968	.001
	N	99	99	99	99	99	99	99	99	99	99
Physical/mental exhaustion	Pearson Correlation	.390**	.570**	.353**	.439**	-.163	1	.632**	.542**	.182	.511**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.000	.108		.000	.000	.071	.000
	N	99	99	99	99	99	99	99	99	99	99
Comfort discussing mental health	Pearson Correlation	.348**	.421**	.239*	.384**	-.082	.632**	1	.558**	.267**	.415**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.017	.000	.420	.000		.000	.008	.000
	N	99	99	99	99	99	99	99	99	99	99
Detachment from studies	Pearson Correlation	.384**	.525**	.408**	.400**	-.183	.542**	.558**	1	.495**	.607**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.000	.070	.000	.000		.000	.000
	N	99	99	99	99	99	99	99	99	99	99
Lack of motivation for career	Pearson Correlation	.450**	.213*	.102	.302**	.004	.182	.267**	.495**	1	.491**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.035	.313	.002	.968	.071	.008	.000		.000
	N	99	99	99	99	99	99	99	99	99	99
Hopelessness about managing stress	Pearson Correlation	.493**	.518**	.358**	.455**	-.319**	.511**	.415**	.607**	.491**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.000	.001	.000	.000	.000	.000	
	N	99	99	99	99	99	99	99	99	99	99

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

There is a correlation table that presents relationships between perceived academic workload, self/family pressure, institutional support, job market stability perception, physical/mental exhaustion, and other stress related factors. Pearson's correlation coefficients are in the range from -1 to 1 measuring the strength of each relationship and its direction. For instance, it is possible to derive that perceived academic workload has a strong positive correlation with physical/mental exhaustion ($r = .390$, $p < .01$), meaning that more exhaustion. Similarly, pressure from self/family expectations correlates strongly with lack of motivation for career ($r = .518$, $p < .01$), reflecting the potential emotional impact of personal and familial expectations. Other notable relationships include comfort discussing mental health correlating positively with detachment from studies ($r = .632$, $p < .01$), hinting that openness about mental health may align with signs of disengagement. These results emphasize the interconnected nature of academic, career, and personal pressures in contributing to stress levels.

Question 2: Career Uncertainty and Stress

This study investigates the impact of career uncertainty on stress levels among Generation Z students. It examines factors such as job market instability, confidence in career readiness, and institutional support. By analysing these elements, the research seeks to uncover how career-related stressors contribute to mental health challenges within this demographic.

Variables Entered/Removed[a]			
Model	Variables Entered	Variables Removed	Method
1	Job market stability perception, Perceived academic workload, Pressure from family expectations , Institutional support perception, Pressure from self/family expectations[b]	.	Enter
a. Dependent Variable: Perceived competition in field			
b. All requested variables entered.			

Model Summary				
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.582[a]	.338	.303	.66518
a. Predictors: (Constant), Job market stability perception, Perceived academic workload, Pressure from family expectations , Institutional support perception, Pressure from self/family expectations				

ANOVA[a]						
Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	21.032	5	4.206	9.507	.000[b]
	Residual	41.149	93	.442		
	Total	62.182	98			
a. Dependent Variable: Perceived competition in field						
b. Predictors: (Constant), Job market stability perception, Perceived academic workload, Pressure from family expectations , Institutional support perception, Pressure from self/family expectations						

Coefficients[a]						
Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	1.843	.417		4.419	.000
	Perceived academic workload	.005	.083	.006	.059	.953
	Pressure from self/family expectations	.250	.082	.315	3.039	.003
	Pressure from family expectations	.115	.067	.174	1.724	.088
	Institutional support perception	.231	.080	.276	2.882	.005
	Job market stability perception	.081	.059	.119	1.362	.176
a. Dependent Variable: Perceived competition in field						

The regression analysis examines the impact of five independent variables—job market stability perception, perceived academic workload, pressure from family expectations, institutional support perception, and pressure from self/family expectations—on the dependent variable, perceived competition in the field. The model summary indicates an R^2 of 0.338, meaning the predictors explain 33.8% of the variance in perceived competition. The ANOVA table shows that the model is statistically significant ($F(5, 93)=9.507, p<.001$), confirming that the predictors collectively influence the dependent variable. Among the predictors, pressure from self/family expectations ($B=0.250, p=.003$) and institutional support perception ($B=0.231, p=.005$) have significant positive effects, indicating these factors contribute meaningfully to perceived competition. In contrast, perceived academic workload ($p=.953$), pressure from family expectations ($p=.088$), and job market stability perception ($p=.176$) are not

significant predictors. These findings suggest that pressures from personal and institutional sources play a more critical role in shaping perceptions of competition than workload or job market concerns.

Question 3: Combined Impact on Burnout

This research explores the combined effects of academic pressure and career uncertainty on burnout among Generation Z students. By examining how these stressors interact, alongside moderating factors such as institutional support and self-care practices, the study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of their collective impact on mental well-being and resilience.

Variables Entered/Removed[a]			
Model	Variables Entered	Variables Removed	Method
1	Support from friends and family, Academic skill relevance to job market, Perceived academic workload, Job market stability perception, Pressure from family expectations , Engagement in self-care practices, Institutional support perception, Confidence in skills for job market, Perceived competition in field, Pressure from self/family expectations[b]	.	Enter
a. Dependent Variable: Hopelessness about managing stress			
b. All requested variables entered.			

Model Summary				
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.744[a]	.553	.502	.53874
a. Predictors: (Constant), Support from friends and family, Academic skill relevance to job market, Perceived academic workload, Job market stability perception, Pressure from family expectations , Engagement in self-care practices, Institutional support perception, Confidence in skills for job market, Perceived competition in field, Pressure from self/family expectations				

ANOVA[a]						
Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	31.628	10	3.163	10.897	.000[b]
	Residual	25.541	88	.290		
	Total	57.169	98			

a. Dependent Variable: Hopelessness about managing stress

b. Predictors: (Constant), Support from friends and family, Academic skill relevance to job market, Perceived academic workload, Job market stability perception, Pressure from family expectations , Engagement in self-care practices, Institutional support perception, Confidence in skills for job market, Perceived competition in field, Pressure from self/family expectations

Coefficients[a]						
Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	.716	.472		1.517	.133
	Perceived academic workload	.220	.069	.264	3.202	.002
	Pressure from self/family expectations	.168	.077	.220	2.167	.033
	Pressure from family expectations	-.010	.056	-.015	-.176	.860
	Institutional support perception	.167	.069	.208	2.417	.018
	Job market stability perception	-.044	.054	-.068	-.821	.414
	Confidence in skills for job market	.006	.071	.008	.083	.934
	Perceived competition in field	.163	.095	.170	1.719	.089
	Academic skill relevance to job market	-.050	.058	-.066	-.865	.390
	Engagement in self-care practices	.123	.088	.125	1.395	.167
	Support from friends and family	.049	.064	.064	.770	.443

a. Dependent Variable: Hopelessness about managing stress

The regression analysis evaluates the combined impact of ten predictors on hopelessness about managing stress as the dependent variable. The model summary reveals an R^2 of 0.553, meaning 55.3% of the variance in hopelessness is explained by the predictors. The model is statistically significant (F(10, 88)=10.897,p<.001), confirming that the predictors collectively influence stress-related hopelessness. Among the predictors, perceived academic workload (B=0.220,p=.002), pressure from self/family expectations (B=0.168,p=.033), and institutional support perception (B=0.167,p=.018) significantly contribute to hopelessness, suggesting these factors intensify stress when they increase. Other variables, such as job market stability perception (p=.414p = .414), confidence in skills for the job market (p=.934), and support from friends and family (p=.443), show no significant impact, indicating their weaker or negligible roles in this context. The results highlight that academic and self/family pressures, along with perceived institutional support, are critical in understanding feelings of hopelessness about managing stress among individuals.

Conclusion

The present study offers significant insights into the interplay between academic pressure, career uncertainty, and their impact on burnout and mental well-being among Generation Z. The correlation analysis reveals substantial relationships between various forms of pressure, including perceived academic workload, self/family expectations, and institutional support, all of which contribute to physical and mental exhaustion, diminished motivation, and disengagement from academic pursuits. Specifically, the positive correlation between perceived academic workload and physical/mental exhaustion ($r = 0.390$, $p < 0.01$) underscores the detrimental effects of academic pressure on student well-being. Similarly, the significant correlation between self/family expectations and career motivation ($r = 0.518$, $p < 0.01$) highlights the emotional strain exerted by personal and familial pressures.

The regression analysis examining career uncertainty reveals that self/family expectations and institutional support perceptions are significant predictors of perceived competition in the job market, accounting for 33.8% of the variance. In contrast, perceived academic workload and job market stability were not significant predictors, suggesting that personal and institutional pressures play a more critical role in shaping individuals' perceptions of career competition than academic workload or job market conditions.

The combined regression analysis further emphasizes the contribution of academic workload, self/family expectations, and institutional support to the experience of hopelessness about managing stress. These factors collectively explained 55.3% of the variance in stress-related hopelessness. Notably,

academic workload (B = 0.220, p = 0.002), self/family expectations (B = 0.168, p = 0.033), and institutional support (B = 0.167, p = 0.018) were significant predictors of hopelessness, while other factors such as job market perceptions and family support showed no significant impact.

In conclusion, the findings suggest that academic pressures, coupled with uncertainties regarding career prospects, particularly those driven by personal and institutional expectations, are significant contributors to burnout and mental distress among Generation Z. These results underscore the importance of addressing both academic and personal pressures through targeted interventions and enhancing institutional support mechanisms to mitigate the adverse effects of stress and promote better mental health outcomes for this demographic.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This study examines the insights associated with academic pressure and career uncertainty as it relates to the mental health of Gen Z, however, it does have its shortcomings. The sample of 99 university students is quite limited in scope, and may not cover the different experiences of a more diverse Gen Z subset. Efforts can be made to include different demographics in the future. Self-reported data can result in biases, hence repeating the study in longitudinal or experimental design is suggested. There are other factors that have not received consideration such as personality traits, coping mechanisms, and culture. This research primarily relates to university students, but early high school children and first job holders experience these issues too. Looking into these demographics will further shed light on this research problem.

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