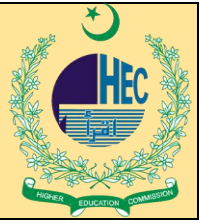




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Academic Stress and Suicidal Ideation among Pakistani College Students: Mediating Role of Perceived Stress and Moderating Effects of Resilience and Impulsivity

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ABSTRACT

Academic stress has emerged as a major psychological concern among the Pakistani youth and has increasingly been linked to the development of the suicidal thoughts and tendencies. Guided by Integrated Motivational Volitional (IMV) model of suicidal behavior and Transactional Stress Theory this study explored how the academic stress contributes to suicidal ideation through perceived stress as a mediator and resilience and impulsivity as moderators. A cross sectional quantitative research design was applied with the total of 250 male college students between the ages of 17 to 21 years with a mean age of 19.0 and standard deviation of 1.2. The participants were selected from the private colleges situated in Lahore and Gujranwala in Pakistan. All participants completed the standardized psychological measures including the Educational Stress Scale for Adolescents (ESSA) the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS 10) the Connor Davidson Resilience Scale (CD RISC 10) the Barratt Impulsiveness Scale Short Form (BIS 11 SF) and the Suicidal Ideation Attributes Scale (SIDAS). Data analysis using PROCESS Macro Model 59 indicated that perceived stress significantly mediated the association between academic stress and suicidal ideation with an indirect effect of 0.22 and a significance level of p less than 0.001. Resilience was found to reduce the impact of perceived stress on the suicidal ideation with beta equal to minus 0.16 and p equal to 0.004 whereas impulsivity increased this association with beta equal to 0.18 and p equal to 0.001. The overall model accounted for 51 percent of the variance in suicidal ideation with R square equal to 0.51 that representing a large effect size. These findings identify perceived stress as a key psychological pathway connecting academic stress to suicidal ideation and underline the vital role of resilience development in educational and counseling environments.

Keywords: Academic Stress, Perceived Stress, Suicidal Ideation, Resilience, Impulsivity, Pakistani Students

1. Introduction

For many young individuals in Pakistan the education is not limited to achieving the good grades but is deeply tied to fulfilling the family expectations and attaining social mobility and upholding the family honor. Academic life in Pakistan therefore carries the intense emotional and psychological strain as success in education often determines a person's self worth and the identity within the collectivist cultural context (Ahmad & Khalid, 2024). Feelings of the guilt and shame often arise when the students fail to meet expectations and these emotions can gradually develop into ongoing stress and the hopelessness (Naseem & Arshad, 2023).

The academic pressure and high parental expectations and the limited coping resources have been identified as major contributors to the psychological breakdowns among students (Liu et al., 2025). Suicidal ideation that defined as the persistent thoughts of taking one's own life and has emerged as an alarming issue among the South Asian college students (Beck et al., 1979; Lee & Park, 2024). In the Pakistani context the male students are often taught to restrain emotions and display self control which reduces their willingness to seek professional help and increases the tendency to internalize the emotional distress (Rehman et al., 2025).

This study draws upon the Integrated Motivational Volitional (IMV) model (O'Connor & Kirtley, 2018) and Transactional Stress Theory (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) to understand how academic stress translates into suicidal ideation. The IMV model explains suicidal behavior as progressing through motivational (cognitive) and volitional (behavioral) phases. Academic stress triggers perceived stress which in turn fuels suicidal thoughts. The strength of this link depends on personal moderators the resilience which buffers and impulsivity which exacerbates risk.

Empirical studies from Asian contexts (Nguyen et al., 2024; Chen et al., 2023) confirm that resilience mitigates the harmful effects of stress while impulsivity intensifies them. However, there is limited evidence from Pakistan where cultural and social expectations create unique pressures. Hence proved that this study investigates the mediating role of the perceived stress and moderating effects of the resilience and the impulsivity in the link between academic stress and suicidal ideation among Pakistani college students.

Hypotheses

1. The academic stress will positively correlate with perceived stress and suicidal ideation.
2. The perceived stress will mediate relationship between academic stress and suicidal ideation.
3. Resilience will weaken whereas impulsivity will strengthen the link between the perceived stress and suicidal ideation.

2. Method

2.1 Research Design and Participants

This study employed a cross-sectional correlational design. The sample included 250 male students aged 17–21 years ($M = 19.0$, $SD = 1.22$) from private colleges in Lahore and Gujranwala. Male students were selected due to their higher academic stress levels and lower tendency to seek psychological support in Pakistani culture (Rehman et al., 2025).

A priori power analysis using G*Power 3.1 indicated that 180 participants were sufficient for detecting a medium effect size ($f^2 = 0.15$, power = .80, $\alpha = .05$). The final sample size was the larger than the number required by power analysis.

2.2 Measures

- Academic Stress was assessed using the Educational Stress Scale for Adolescents (ESSA) developed by Sun et al. (2024). This scale consists of 16 items measured on a five point Likert scale and demonstrated a reliability coefficient of alpha 0.88.

- Perceived Stress was measured through the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS 10) created by Cohen et al. (2023). It includes 10 items rated from 0 to 4 and showed an internal consistency value of alpha 0.87.
- Resilience was assessed using the Connor Davidson Resilience Scale (CD RISC 10) developed by Connor and Davidson (2024). This instrument contains 10 items rated from 0 to 4 and reported an internal reliability of alpha 0.90.
- Impulsivity was measured with the Barratt Impulsiveness Scale Short Form (BIS 11 SF) designed by Steinberg et al. (2023). It consists of 15 items rated from 1 to 4 and demonstrated a reliability coefficient of alpha 0.85.
- Suicidal Ideation was evaluated using the Suicidal Ideation Attributes Scale (SIDAS) developed by van Spijker et al. (2024). This scale includes 5 items rated from 0 to 10 and showed a high internal consistency with an alpha value of 0.92.

All instruments had been previously validated among South Asian samples. A pilot study with 30 participants was conducted to ensure the language was clear and the content was culturally appropriate.

2.3 Procedure

Data collection took place from January to March 2025 during classroom sessions of approximately 20 minutes each. Participation was completely voluntary and anonymous. After data collection a short mental health awareness session was conducted. Missing data below 2% were handled using mean substitution.

2.4 Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using SPSS version 28 along with the PROCESS Macro (Model 59; Hayes, 2022). Descriptive statistics and Pearson correlation and regression analyses were employed to examine the mediation and moderation hypotheses. Bootstrapping with 5000 resamples was applied to generate bias-corrected 95% confidence intervals.

3. Results

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics and Intercorrelations of Study Variables (N = 250)

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1. Academic Stress	3.42	0.69	—				
2. Perceived Stress	2.91	0.66	.54**	—			
3. Resilience	2.86	0.60	-.36**	-.44**	—		
4. Impulsivity	2.71	0.58	.32**	.40**	-.31**	—	
5. Suicidal Ideation	3.10	0.79	.46**	.57**	-.42**	.38**	—

Note. $p < .01$. All study variables fell within the acceptable range for skewness and kurtosis (± 1). As presented in Table 1, academic stress showed a positive correlation with perceived stress and both were significantly associated with higher levels of suicidal ideation. Conversely resilience was negatively linked to academic stress and perceived stress and suicidal ideation highlighting its buffering effect. The impulsivity on the other hand exhibited the positive correlations with the perceived stress and the suicidal ideation underscoring its role as a possible risk factor

Table 2: The Mediation Analysis Showing the Perceived Stress as a Mediator Between the Academic Stress and the Suicidal Ideation

Path	β	SE	T	P	95% CI
Academic Stress → Perceived Stress	.54	.06	8.98	<.001	[.42, .67]
Perceived Stress → Suicidal Ideation	.40	.07	6.12	<.001	[.27, .53]
Academic Stress → Suicidal Ideation (Direct Effect)	.21	.08	2.71	.008	[.06, .36]
Indirect Effect (Mediation)	.22	—	—	<.001	[.13, .33]

Model Summary. $R^2 = .51$, $F(6, 243) = 42.13$, $p < .001$, $f^2 = .26$ (large effect). Table 2 shows that mediation findings and revealing the perceived stress played a significant mediating role in the association between the academic stress and the suicidal ideation. The indirect effect was statistically significant supporting the evidence of the partial mediation. This suggests that the students facing academic stress that tends to develop the suicidal thoughts largely due to the increased perceived stress rather than solely from the direct impact of the academic demands.

Table 3: Moderation of Resilience and Impulsivity on the Relationship Between Perceived Stress and Suicidal Ideation

Interaction Term	β	SE	t	p	95% CI
Perceived Stress $\times$ Resilience	-.16	.05	-2.90	.004	[-.27, -.05]
Perceived Stress $\times$ Impulsivity	.18	.05	3.34	.001	[.07, .29]

Model Summary. $R^2 = .51$, $F(6, 243) = 42.13$, $p < .001$. Table 3 shows that the resilience notably reduced the positive link between perceived stress and the suicidal ideation implying that the greater resilience acted as the protective factor. In contrast the impulsivity intensified this connection indicating that the individuals with the higher impulsivity are more prone to convert perceived stress into suicidal thinking.

Table 4: Conditional Effects of Perceived Stress on Suicidal Ideation at Varying Levels of Moderators

Moderator	Level	β	SE	T	p	95% CI
Resilience	-1 SD (Low)	.45	.09	5.00	<.001	[.27, .63]
Resilience	+1 SD (High)	.18	.09	2.03	.043	[.01, .35]
Impulsivity	-1 SD (Low)	.29	.08	3.62	<.001	[.13, .45]
Impulsivity	+1 SD (High)	.52	.08	6.50	<.001	[.36, .68]

Table 4 outlines the conditional effects revealing that the perceived stress had a stronger influence on the suicidal ideation among the participants with low resilience and the elevated impulsivity. When the resilience levels were high this influence considerably decreased highlighting the moderating role of the resilience in shielding individuals from the harmful impact of stress.

4. Discussion

This research demonstrates how the academic pressure contributes to the suicidal thinking through the perceived stress and how this relationship is influenced by the individual traits such as resilience and the impulsivity. These findings are consistent with the Integrated Motivational Volitional (IMV) model (O'Connor & Kirtley, 2018) and the Transactional Theory of Stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) both of which emphasize that the personal appraisal of the stress shapes emotional reactions.

Perceived stress functioned as a key psychological link between academic burden and suicidal ideation, supporting earlier evidence (Nguyen et al., 2024). Students who viewed academic demands as overwhelming were more prone to feelings of hopelessness and suicidal thinking. Resilience emerged as the significant the protective element in line with the work of Chen et al. (2023) indicating that the emotionally adaptable individuals perceive stressful situations as the manageable challenges rather than threats. In contrast the impulsivity strengthened the suicidal ideation aligning suggesting that students with limited emotional control tend to respond to distress quickly and without careful thought (Rahman et al. (2024)

4.1 Cultural Interpretation

In the Pakistani context, the academic achievement is often viewed as a reflection of the family pride and the masculine duty. Consequently the academic failure is not only seen as a personal

setback but also as a source of the social embarrassment. Men in the particular are raised to hide their emotions and refrain from showing vulnerability. This emotional suppression causes distress to accumulate quietly sometimes resulting in impulsive or self harming behaviors. These outcomes highlight the urgent need to build the emotionally supportive the learning environments where the students can share their struggles openly without the fear of stigma or criticism.

5. Implications

These compelling results carry the several important practical implications. Educational institutions should implement the comprehensive resilience enhancement programs including the mindfulness practice the group counseling and the emotional regulation workshops to equip students with the effective stress management skills. Teachers and the academic advisors must also receive the structured mental health awareness training to detect and respond to the early indicators of psychological distress.

Policymakers in accordance with the Pakistan's National Youth Mental Health Framework (2023) can promote the integration of the school-based mental health services as a preventive strategy. In addition the family-focused psychoeducation can help reshape the perceptions of academic success shifting attention away from the blame and the shame toward the empathy the encouragement and the sustained emotional support.

6. Limitations and Future Directions

The cross sectional design of this study restricts the ability to establish the causal relationships. The reliance on the self report instruments may have introduced the potential response bias. As the research included only the male participants the findings cannot be extended to the female students or the coeducational contexts.

Future investigations should adopt the longitudinal or the intervention based approaches to evaluate whether the resilience oriented training programs can causally lessen the suicidal ideation. Furthermore the inclusion of the public college samples along with the qualitative exploration can offer the deeper understanding of the contextual dimensions of academic stress experiences.

7. Conclusion

This study reaffirms that the academic stress plays a crucial role in contributing to the suicidal ideation among Pakistani students primarily through the impact of the perceived stress. The findings emphasize the resilience as a strong protective element and the impulsivity as a potential vulnerability indicator. Within the competitive and collectivist educational environment of Pakistan the fostering of emotional resilience and the promotion of adaptive coping practices should be viewed as essential objectives. The encouragement of open dialogue about mental health and the creation of culturally grounded prevention strategies can greatly reduce the risk of suicidal ideation among the young learners.

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