

Defensive Pessimism and Academic Stress among College Students

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The aim of the study was to determine whether there is a relationship between Defensive Pessimism and Academic Stress Among College Students. The research aims to explore how negative thinking about the future can influence/ impact the students' academic experiences and stress levels. A quantitative correlational design was employed; the data collected from 106 postgraduate students in Ernakulam and Bangalore using standardized questionnaires—the Defensive Pessimism Questionnaire and Academic Stress Scale. Results revealed a significant positive correlation ($r = 0.292$, $p < 0.01$) between defensive pessimism and academic stress, indicating that students with higher levels of defensive pessimism experience more academic stress. Linear Regression analysis further showed that defensive pessimism significantly predicts 8.5% of the variance in academic stress. These findings suggest that while defensive pessimism may function as a coping mechanism, it can also increase stress in academic contexts. Limitations include a small, convenience-based sample, time constraints, self-report measures.

Keywords: Defensive Pessimism, Academic Stress, College Students, learned helplessness theory, Mental health

Pessimism is a psychological feature characterized by a more pessimistic—or realistic—view of life rather than a mental condition. When things appear to be going smoothly, a pessimist is suspicious and typically anticipates negative repercussions. Most people don't want to be pessimistic. It's linked to despair, a "glass half-full" mentality, negativity, and other mood disorders. (Scott, E. 2025). A moderate amount of pessimism, nevertheless, is not always a bad thing. Pessimism can also refer to a lack of optimism for the future, an emphasis on the "darker" parts of a situation or event, or an intense expectation of a negative outcome (Carver and Scheier, 2014). College students have a lot of challenges of academic pressures, social expectations, and personal challenges, all of which contribute to their stress levels.

While stress can mostly improve performance and motivate students, excessive or chronic stress often leads to

negative outcomes, including anxiety, depression, and decreased academic performance. (Murphy & Archer, 1996) Pessimism, characterized by a negative outlook on one's future and a tendency to ruminate on failures, may exacerbate feelings of stress and hinder students' ability to manage with academic Requirements. "Defensive Pessimism—A cognitive approach in which low expectations are kept for performance even when the individuals have a good history of successive achievements". (Norem & Cantor, 1986) An Individual using this approach imagines out most scenarios that may happen and works hard to prepare for the upcoming situation. (Norem & Cantor, 1986). This approach leads to utilization of anxiety as motivation and subsequently good performance Norem (2001). Those who score high on the Defensive Pessimism Questionnaire (DPQ) are considered defensive pessimists Norem

(2001). Research has indicated that Pessimism moderates negative emotional responses to stress, leading to increased repetition and continue negative emotions over time.(Jones et al.2017). According to studies, some of the stressors that students face includes Rivalry with other students, failures, communication breakdown with teachers and classmates, difficulty understanding lectures, semester exams, lack of leisure time, crowded lecture halls, insufficient resources to complete academic work etc.

Carveth et. al. (1996), "Academic stressors include the student's perception of the extensive knowledge base required and the perception of an inadequate time to develop that knowledge." In a 1996 study, (Murphy&Archer,1996) discovered that pupils suffer from physical exhaustion and psychological impairment when stress becomes severe and Dangerous. Scholarly Students' social lives both inside and outside of the institution are impacted by stress.

According to Altbach (1970), graduate students frequently believe that teachers have control over their lives and that their own lives are helpless. The inability to achieve social intimacy is another source of stress for students. According to research by Abouserie (1994), students during each semester during exams suffer academic stress. The most common academic stress is caused by studying for tests, which need a lot of textbooks or other resources to be learned in a less amount of time.

Statement of the problem

The study "Defensive Pessimism and Academic Stress among College Students" aims to provide insights into how a negative outlook can influence or impact their academic experiences. The reason for this study comes from an increasing understanding of mental health issues among college students and the need for effective

solutions. By examining the relationship between pessimism and academic stress, furthermore, understanding how Defensive pessimism affects academic stress can be instrumental for educators and mental health professionals in designing programs that foster resilience, promote positive thinking, and enhance coping strategies among students.

The existing research on the connection between defensive pessimism and academic stress in college students is sparse, indicating a possible literature gap. While multiple studies explore related subjects, such as how stress affects academic performance and mental health, the specific effect of defensive pessimism in this context has not been studied as extensively. Although it has been shown in prior research that academic stress impacts mental health and performance, the exact function of defensive pessimism in this connection or relationship remains unclear.

In India, the number of studies conducted on this topic is lower. As psychologist Julie Norem suggests, "For some individuals, positive thinking is ineffective and they should consider adopting a strategy of defensive pessimism. Here's the method: when confronted with a task that triggers anxiety, rather than trying to get yourself pumped up, try to reduce your expectations on purpose. Practice all scenarios that could potentially fail, and create plans to prevent each possible error. This will create a sense of control and lessen anxiety, aiding you in performing effectively. Or, maybe not." (Norem, 2008, p. 15)

Theoretical Framework

Seligman's Learned helplessness Theory; Learned helplessness, a psychological phenomenon, it was first proposed by (Seligman & Maier, 1967) in animal experiments. It involves persistently facing painful and uncontrollable situations, leading

to despair rather than overcoming them, despite one's ability to avoid or overcome them, Ackerman MA (2018)

In the study by Kim et al (2023) it is said that Academic stress among East Asian adolescents has led to "learned helplessness," a psychological phenomenon where they constantly face painful situations and despair.

According to research, unsatisfied Exam scores and Exam Anxiousness can lead to learned helplessness, it is important to end negative thinking and strengthen defense mechanisms through CBT and Emotional support from parents or teachers. Pessimistic students mostly feel negative outlook over their academic accomplishments, leading to higher Academic stress when presented with problems with difficulty Even though it can be solved Students may not believe their efforts will contribute positive results. Which mostly enhances negative thinking.

Defensive pessimism refers to a cognitive strategy where individuals mostly set low expectations for their upcoming performance despite having performed well or succeeded in the past". (Norem& Cantor,1986). "This method involves individuals mentally repeating and reflecting about potential outcomes especially negative outcomes (Norem& Cantor,1986)". "Individuals who are thinking through these mental repetitions/rehearsals and worrying about all potential problems is followed by hard work and preparation (Norem, 2001)." "Individuals who apply this method shift from feeling anxious and powerless to using their anxiety as a source of motivation." (Norem& Cantor,1986) These individuals perform well which can lead to better performance (Norem, 2001). Academic stress is a widespread concern affecting students globally. According to Lee & Larson (2000) and Lou & Chi (2000), it can be defined as the interaction between a student and environmental stressors,

encompassing how the student manages academic challenges and the mental or physical responses that arise from these stressors.

Academic Stress

Plenty of research has shown that high academic stress often harms the well-being and academic Results A study Conducted by Prabawanti, C.(2024) looking at industrial engineering students and noticed that both self -efficacy and optimism has significant impact academic stress. And Optimism did not have any impact on Academic Stress. Another study conducted by Liu et al. (2023) to explore the Relationship between academic stress and depression among college students to check the roles of negative affect and sleep quality, as well as the role of social support in the relationship between negative affect and sleep quality. Results show academic stress cause depression, affects negative affect and quality sleep plays and also bad influence depressive symptoms. Additionally, social support may help making less severe of negative affect on quality sleep . In another study conducted by Mathur & Sharma, (2015) in the IIS University, Jaipur, Rajasthan, Department of Psychology, on the topic "Academic Stress in relation with Optimism and Resilience" The aim of the study was to explore whether there is a relationship of academic stress with certain variables like optimism and resilience among 300 students, aged 16 to 18 years taken from Jaipur city. The findings showed that academic stress was negatively correlated to both and that these variables significantly predicted levels of academic stress.

One literature also pointed on the gender differences of academic stress on achievement of students Gobena. (2024) In the Findings, Academic stress Largely affects student's academic achievement, with females reported more stress than male and

also found most of them engaging in risky behaviours of 69 substance abuse, dropout rate and low graduation rate in Female Students. 31% of respondents reported of involving in unsafe sex, Smoking, Engage in physical violence and poor hygiene. Rentala et al. (2019) did research on Adolescent Girls who are studying in pre-universities and universities in Dharwad city, India. The study found out that Undergraduate students reported that they are under academic stress. It was also found the factors such as personality types, educational backgrounds, course combinations, no of siblings affected and the number of siblings all had an influence on their stress. Barbayannis et al. (2022) conducted study on the topic "Academic Stress and Mental Well-Being in College Students: Correlations, Affected Groups, and COVID-19" with an objective to evaluate academic stress and mental well-being in college students and exploring the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on stress levels. In the findings Increased Academic Pressure is linked to worsen health of the mind, non-binary individuals experienced the poorest mental health and the greatest academic stress, and students identifying as non-binary, women have greater academic pressure compared to Men. Dickson Adom, Joshua Chukwu ere, and Mavis Osei conducted literature review on academic stress among faculty, students in higher education. The review drew on sources from databases such as Springer, JSTOR, PubMed, EBSCO, ProQuest, and Google Scholar Oduwaiye et al. (2017), said that stress can have both Positive, Negative effects. Positive stress, however will be helpful and can be endured for a while Negative stress, can generates anxiety, lasts a long time, which can create fear, panic, disturbs, lowers one's values and productive Life, among other things Gulzhaina et al. (2018). Positive stress, in contrast, helps boost an individual's attitude, behavior, motivation,

and overall performance. It also contributes at emotional and physiological health.

Academic stress and Pessimism

A study was conducted by González et al. (2015) to find whether there is Relationships between academic stress and support social, optimism-pessimism and self-esteem among Students. Findings showed that the chosen predictor variables did not account for the physical signs of stress. The research showed that higher satisfaction with practical social support, along with optimism, could forecast stress-related behaviors. The research concluded that self-esteem was not a significant predictor. MANOVA analysis was done to find out that predictor variables have an effect on Demographic factors (Social support, Age, Gender)

Another study done by Bhatia and Mishra (2024), In which secondary data was taken from numerous research studies which have explored on the connection between optimism/pessimism, locus of control, and their impacts on academic performance and well-being. Method used was a detailed literature review and the combining of finding from various studies to offer complete understanding of these psychological concepts. The relevant studies were taken from PubMed, PsycINFO etc, to check literature reviews such as "optimism," "pessimism," "locus of control". "Peer-reviewed articles focusing on adolescents and/or educators, examining the relationship between optimism/pessimism, locus of control, and academic or well-being outcomes. Only publications from the past 30 years were considered." Results found out that Various positive outcomes, including enhanced academic performance, greater well-being, and resilience in the face of difficulties, are associated with adolescent optimism. Seligman et al., (1995). "Students with a positive outlook are more likely to succeed in effective problem-solving and

display determination in their studies” (Carver & Scheier, 2014). A study by Rezaei et al. (2015) which investigates the relationship between optimism, pessimism, and coping strategies, and their collective impact on the mental health of university students in Lorestan of the academic year 2014, the sample size of both Male and Female students at Lorestan University was 8000 students. Results revealed that optimism is generally associated with better mental health outcomes, as optimistic students tend to employ more effective coping strategies in the face of stress. On the other hand, pessimism is connected to poorer mental health and negative coping strategies.

Defensive Pessimism

Del Mar Ferradás Canedo et al. (2018) explored the links between defensive pessimism, self-esteem, and achievement goals. Their aim was to compare different combinations of defensive pessimism, self-esteem, and to assess whether these profiles showed variations in achievement. Results indicated notable differences in achievement goals across the four identified profiles. Students Learners who combined high self-esteem with strong defensive pessimism were to work diligently toward their objectives, while those with low self-esteem and high defensive pessimism tended avoid challenging tasks. A study conducted by Ravi et al. (2020) to examine defensive pessimism, coping and psychological functioning among youth and also to examine the relationship between defensive pessimism, perceived stress, coping and psychological functioning the Results showed that average DPQ scores indicate that the study sample consisted of defensive pessimists, not strategic optimists. Another study was conducted by Atta et al. (2024) to explore the Relationship Between Defensive Pessimism, Goal Orientation, and Self-Esteem Among Nursing Students, among 400 students in nursing college at Damanhour University, the study revealed

that 56.28% of participants had low defensive pessimism, low goal orientation, and mild self-esteem Elevated defensive pessimism correlated with increased focus on goals but reduced self-esteem levels.

Research Gap

Most Research have not studied in understanding Relationship between Defensive pessimism and Academic stress in college students, leading to an unaddressed issue in the existing literature. While many research has been carried out on similar topics, like impact on stress on academic performance and mental health, role of defensive pessimism in this area has not been thoroughly investigated. Although the current research indicates academic stress has important effect on Mental health and Performance, but about defensive pessimism in this relationship remains uncertain. Additional Research could shed light on how negative attitudes contribute to or alleviate academic stress, potentially leading to new insights into effective treatments and support options for students. Currently, there are fewer studies on this topic in India.

Need and Significance of the Study

Due to demanding studies, higher expectations, and competition, college students often encounter significant academic stress. To create effective support systems, it is essential to understand how Defensive pessimism contributes to the increasing of Academic stress.

Impact on Academic Performance: Defensive Pessimism can negatively influence academic performance by leading to procrastination, avoidance behaviors, and a decrease in motivation.

It is also noticed large amount of research of academic stress and mental health, particular impact by defensive pessimism as

an understanding factor has not been extensively studied. This research can address a significant gap in existing literature and enhance understanding of the effects of cognitive styles on stress and performance.

Objective

To measure the relationship of Defensive pessimistic symptoms and academic stress among college Students

Null Hypothesis

H0 There is no significant relationship between Defensive pessimistic symptoms and academic stress in college students.

Method

Sample

The study conducted by González et al. (2015) had a sample size of 118 participants in this study were third-year psychology students from the University of Malaga (Spain) (93 women and 25 males), ages 20 to 31 (mean = 21.4 years, SD = 0.41). Data was gathered in the 2012–13 academic year. - Based on the typical reasons in research similar to Fernández-González et al. (2015), and specific reasons why they chose a sample size of 118 participants include in essence, Fernández-González et al. (2015) most likely chose a sample size of 118 based on power analysis to provide sufficient statistical strength for finding medium-sized effects. It incorporated practical factors such as participant availability and resource constraints. It was adequate for the analytical methods they used (correlation/regression). The sample size collected from the participants was 106 due to time constraints and unavailability

The Population taken for this study was college students within the age range of 20 - 27 years postgraduates. In college context,

convenience sampling serves as an effective means of gathering data from postgraduate students who are 20 to 27 years old.

Tools

Defensive Pessimism Questionnaires
Norem, J. K. (2001). The Defensive Pessimism Scale is a psychological tool designed to measure defensive pessimism. The first version was made by JK Norem in the 1980's. The Defensive Pessimism Questionnaire (DPQ) (Norem, 2001). The scale reports a test–retest reliability -0.708 and a correlation coefficient - 0.65 when compared to Optimism–Pessimism pre-screening measure. It is structured around two core dimensions: negative expectations and reflection. Respondents indicate agreement with each statement on a seven-point Likert scale, where 1 means “Not at all true of me” and 7 means “Very true of me.” Scores are determined by adding up all item responses, giving a total range from 12 to 84. (Atta et al. 2024)

Academic Stress Scale: (Jain & Dixit, 2016). Academic Stress scale is a self-administering scale primarily focusing on Academic burden, Difficulties in understanding subject matter, fear of examinations and Teacher's Attitude. Participants respond using options such as strongly agree, agree, undecided, disagree, and strongly disagree. Developed and standardized by Dr. Poorva Jain and Dr. Neelam Dikshit at Noble College of Education, Sagar, the questionnaire was prepared at the Agra Psychological Research Cell, Belan Ganj, Agra. The scale measures students' levels of academic stress, and its reliability and validity were tested using the split-half method and test–retest reliability on 300 students. The results showed a retest reliability of 0.86, a reliability index of 0.93, and a split-half reliability coefficient of 0.79.

The validation reviewed by eight teachers and two psychologists, with positive feedback

from the administered students. Responses are rated on a 5-point scale: 5 – Strongly

agree, 4 – Agree, 3 – Undecided, 2 – Disagree, and 1 – Strongly disagree. (Jain & Dixit, 2016)

Results

Table 1 . Descriptive Statistics of Defensive pessimism and Academic Stress Among CollegeStudents(N=106)

Variable	Mean	StdError	Std Deviation	Median	IQR	Mode	Range
Defensive Pessimism	54.45	1.138	11.71	54.50	17.25	64.00	58.0
AcademicStress	81.89	2.026	20.86	82.50	25.25	78.00	94.0

Above Table shows the descriptive statistics between Defensive Pessimism and Academic Stress. The total Number of Participants in the research taken is 106. The mean Value of Defensive Pessimism scores were $M = 54.45$ ($SD = 11.71$) while the Academic Stress was $M = 81.89$ ($SD = 20.86$). Means that mean, standard deviation in Academic Stress is higher than Defensive Pessimism. The median Value of Defensive Pessimism $m = 54.50$ ($IQR = 17.25$) while the median value of academic Stress was $m = 82.50$ ($IQR = 25.25$). Median, IQR of Academic Stress is higher than Defensive Pessimism. The mode for Defensive Pessimism is 64 ($RANGE = 58$) while the mode for Academic Stress was 78 ($RANGE = 94$). Thus, the mode was greater in Academic Stress than Defensive Pessimism.

The Figure 1 shows histogram for DPQ Scores includes a normal Distribution Curve; the curve Demonstrates a Moderately bell-shaped Pattern which suggests that the distribution of scores is approximately normal. The alignment between the bars and normal curve indicates that statistical tests of parametric are met. The mean score is $M=54.45$ with a standard deviation of $SD= 11.718$, and the sample size is $N=106$.

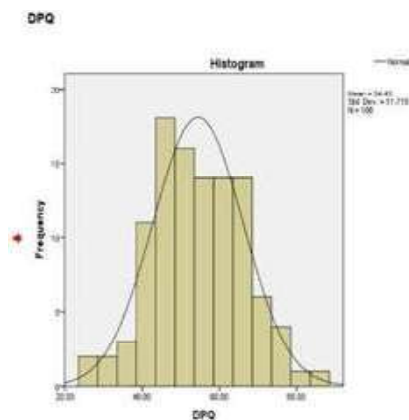


Figure 1. Histogram for Defensive pessimism

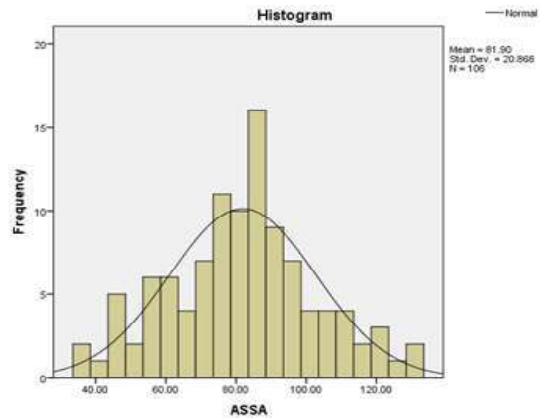


Figure 2. Histogram for Academic Stress

The Figure 2 above shows the histogram of ASSA Scores includes a normal Distribution Curve; the curve Demonstrates a Moderately bell-shaped Pattern which suggests that the distribution of scores is approximately normal. The alignment between the bars and normal curve indicates that statistical tests of parametric are met. The mean score is $M= 81.90$ with a standard

deviation of SD= 20.87, and the sample size is N = 106.

Table 2. Pearson correlation coefficient of Defensive Pessimism, Academic Stress among College Students (n=106)

Variable	Defensive Pessimism	Academic Stress
Defensive pessimism	1	0.292**
Academic stress	0.292**	1

**sig at 0.01 level

Table 2 shows that the relationship between Defensive Pessimism and Academic Stress among College Students - 0.292. which is significant at 0.01 level. Indicates that there is a positive relationship between Defensive Pessimism and Academic Stress among College Students. Which means that higher levels of defensive pessimistic symptoms associated with higher Academic stress symptoms. Among college students have tendency to overthink, fear about their future aspects and becoming a failure, In the findings it can be found that the symptoms of defensive pessimism have a significance in academic stress that is, fear of being failure, Pressure of deadlines, not able to balance personal and academic performance, irritability, procrastination. The Null Hypothesis - There is no significant relationship between Defensive pessimistic symptoms, Academic stress in college students is hence rejected.

Table 3. Regression Analysis for predictors of defensive pessimism on Academic Stress among College Students(N=106)

Model	R	R ²	Adjusted R Square	F	Sig
1	R=.292	(R ² =.85)	Adjusted R=.077	F=9.709	P=.002

Table 4. Regression Analysis for Predictor Defensive pessimism on Academic Stress among College Students(N=106)

Variable	B	SE	Beta	T	P
DPQ	.520	.167	.292	3.116	.002

The table 3 and 4 shows the impact of defensive Pessimism on Academic Stress among College students, Linear Regression, the results from the above table that Defensive Pessimism can significantly predicted Academic Stress, the table shows positive significant relationship R²= .85, which means the 8.5% of academic Stress can be explained by defensive Pessimism. Adjusted R =0.77, Just shows the complexity, The unstandardized coefficient B for DPQ is 0.520, That means when defensive pessimism increases with 1-point Academic Stress increases .520 .t = 3.116, p=.002, shows significant Effect, which means college students who scored high in Defensive Pessimism scale also scored more in Academic stress Scale. Therefore, it can be proven that Defensive pessimism has an impact on Academic Stress among College Students. There is no significant relationship between Defensive pessimistic symptoms, Academic stress in college students is hence rejected.

Discussion

The study was initiated out of curiosity, aiming to explore whether relationship exists between Defensive Pessimism and Academic Stress." According to Rossman (2010). pessimism can be classified as either dispositional or defensive. "While defensive pessimism refers to being ready for bad things, dispositional pessimism is a habit to consistently believing in negative. people can take proactive measures to protect themselves by adopting defensive pessimism." "Defensive pessimism differs from dispositional pessimism in that it means empowering oneself by being prepared for

any circumstance rather than merely recognizing and accepting that everything will go wrong (Rossman, 2010)". Excessive academic stress can have an influence on students since it increases the Mental and physical concerns.

According to the replies of participants, from the questionnaire academic stressors include Exams, Expectations from parents, Teacher-Student Relationships, Interactions. Unable to have extracurricular Activities within school. Based on the previous Research by Academic Stress and Psychological Variables: Numerous research (e.g., Permata et al., 2024; Gobena, 2024; Barbayannis et al., 2023) have found substantial links between academic stress and variables such as self-efficacy, optimism, resilience, social support, and mental health. Higher self-efficacy and optimism, for example, seem to protect against academic stress, although resilience and social support play important roles as mediators.

Impact of COVID-19 A recent study (e.g., Barbayannis et al., 2023) found that the epidemic raised academic stress and severe impact on mental health, particularly among at-risk demographics such as non-binary and second-year students. Defensive Pessimism: Several studies (e.g., Ferradás et al., 2018; Berry, 2007; Atta et al., 2024) have looked into defensive pessimism as a strategic approach that can occasionally increase academic achievement by developing readiness, despite its association with anxiety and low self-esteem. Despite the breadth of studies, there is still a gap in understanding the role and relationship of defensive pessimism and academic stress among college students, particularly in Indian context.

Most previous research focuses on general stress, optimism-pessimism, or resilience, with little emphasis on how defensive pessimism affects stress and

performance. The research results, when examined against the hypothesis, disclosed there is, in fact a significant relationship between Defensive Pessimism and Academic Stress among college students. This indicates higher levels pessimistic symptoms linked with higher levels of academic stress. Furthermore, linear regression analysis demonstrated Defensive Pessimism have measurable impact on Academic Stress in this population. Therefore, hypothesis stating that there is no significant relationship between defensive pessimistic symptoms, academic stress among college students is rejected.

Conclusion

Research intended evaluate relationship of defensive pessimism and academic stress on college students. Defensive pessimism refers being prepared for negative circumstances. When academic stress becomes excessive, it can cause mental and physical concerns, including anxiety, depression, nervousness, and stress-induced disorders.

Academic stressors include exams, expectations from parent's, unable to do extracurricular activities overburdening the students with Assignments. Previous research has found links between academic stress & variables such as self-efficacy, optimism, resilience, social support, and mental health. However, there is still a gap in understanding the role and relationship - defensive pessimism, academic stress among college students, particularly in Indian context. Findings suggest that defensive pessimism has an effect on academic stress among college students, rejecting hypothesis no significant relationship.

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