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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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Perceived Academic Competition and Academic Burnout among Intermediate College Students in Pakistan

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Abstract: Intermediate education in Pakistan is a crucial stage because grades at this level are associated with admission to reputable educational institutes in Pakistan. Therefore, perceived academic competition among intermediate students is high. Limited attention is given to the association between perceived academic competition and academic burnout among intermediate college students in Pakistan. Therefore, the aim of the study is to fill the gap in the indigenous literature and come up with proper implications. The study adopted a cross-sectional correlational study design and a purposive sampling technique. The data was collected from intermediate students from private and public colleges, adolescents aged 15 to 19. The study followed APA 7th ethical guidelines throughout the procedure; for students under 18, proper parental consent was taken. The study utilized standardized questionnaires, namely, the Perceived Classroom Competitiveness Scale and Maslach Burnout Inventory–Student Survey (MBI-SS). The correlational analysis of the study reported a significant positive relationship between perceived academic competition and academic burnout. In addition, linear regression demonstrated that perceived academic competition significantly and positively predicted academic burnout. The findings of the study revealed that there is a need for proper intervention programs in educational settings, and parental counselling is also important.

Keywords: Perceived Academic Competition, Academic Burnout, College Students

Introduction

Perceived academic competition can be defined as the students' subjective belief regarding classmates, peers or those sharing educational environment who are actively in competition against them for grades, success, as well as institutional recognition (Fu & Li, 2025; Kowalski & Christensen, 2019; Zhou et al., 2025). In Pakistan, academic competition is very high, particularly among college students, as the marks in intermediate also act as a criterion for admission to well-reputed universities, engineering colleges, and medical colleges (Fardows et al., 2017; Rind & Malik, 2019). The students therefore internalize and interpret the race for academic survival, limited opportunities and high grades (Chen et al., 2025). Striving for scholarships is even more difficult as very high grades and conceptual clarity is required for getting the scholarship; the country socioeconomic circumstances are very low making many students on the disadvantaged positions; therefore one must compete to get good grades to get the scholarship and pursue good career in future (Bashir et al., 2025). High levels of this perception often result in greater stress and anxiety, and a shift from a growth mindset to a performance-driven objective, in which self-worth is

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associated with outperforming classmates and peers (Chen et al., 2025; Javaid et al., 2024; Kowalski & Christensen, 2019).

Intermediate education is a critical stage in students' lives in Pakistan's cultural context because students' academic performance can affect their eligibility for admission to competitive university programs. Students may experience greater pressure associated with examinations, expectations regarding grades, particularly from family, and competition for admission in a preferred degree in a reputable educational institute. A previous study conducted on college students residing in Karachi reported that academic pressure, financial issues, and family-related higher concerns relating to high grades were the important stressors contributing detrimentally to the students' overall wellbeing and social life specifically (Sajid et al., 2026). Likewise, similar research on first-year college students in Pakistan reported that perceived stress was inversely associated with academic achievement (Javaid et al., 2024). These findings indicate that academic demands may be specifically vital during educational transitions. However, academic pressure is different from perceived competition, as students may go through heavy workloads without perceiving peers as rivals. Assessing perceived competition may depict a clear view of its association with academic burnout among intermediate students in Pakistan.

Academic burnout is defined as the pattern of emotional exhaustion, disengagement from academic activities, and diminished feelings of academic achievement that may occur when students go through longer periods of academic demands and psychological strain. These experiences can influence students' engagement, motivation, and overall well-being. Recent study comprising 1,347 high school students reported that negative life events were significantly associated with learning burnout, emphasizing the importance of assessing the stressors and circumstances that elevate burnout during adolescence (Dai et al., 2026). Furthermore, another similar study conducted on Chinese university students indicated that perceived competitive school climate was positively associated with academic burnout, indicating that students' perceptions of their educational climate may be associated with their burnout experiences (Song et al., 2026).

In Pakistan, recent research has assessed academic stress and mental well-being among intermediate students in Lahore, reporting a positive association between both study variables (Sadaqat et al., 2026). Research conducted among Pakistani young adults has also examined the associations between problematic social media use, upward social comparison, and psychological distress, highlighting the relevance of psychosocial processes when investigating mental health outcomes in the local context (Shahid et al., 2026). However, the relationship between perceived academic competition and academic burnout specifically among intermediate college students in Pakistan remains overlooked and needs to be studied.

Rationale

Intermediate education is an important stage in Pakistan, where academic performance affects university admission opportunities, scholarship eligibility, and future career objectives. These demands may motivate students to view their classmates as competitors, therefore increasing psychological strain and academic burnout. Although previous research has examined academic stress and burnout, limited studies have given attention to perceived academic competition as a distinct factor associated with burnout. International studies have reported that competitive educational environments may elevate students' burnout experiences. However, this relationship remains overlooked among intermediate college students in Pakistan. Therefore, the objective of the study is to examine the association between perceived academic competition and academic burnout among intermediate college students in Pakistan.

Hypotheses

H1: There is a positive and significant relationship between perceived academic competition and academic burnout among college students in Pakistan.

H2: Perceived academic competition positively and significantly predicts academic burnout among college students in Pakistan.

Methodology

The study utilized a cross-sectional correlational study design and a purposive sampling technique to collect the data from intermediate students aged 15 to 19 years, enrolled in public and private colleges of Pakistan.

Participants

The demographic characteristics of the 180 intermediate college students are presented in terms of age, gender, academic discipline, type of college, and residential city. The participants had a mean age of 16.51 years (SD = 1.42). Regarding gender, 94 (52.2%) participants were women, while 86 (47.8%) were men. In terms of academic discipline, 65 (36.1%) participants were enrolled in pre-medical, 45 (25.0%) in pre-engineering, 35 (19.4%) in Intermediate in Computer Science (ICS), 27 (15.0%) in Intermediate in Commerce, and 8 (4.4%) in FA (Faculty of Arts). Regarding the type of college, 100 (55.6%) participants were enrolled in public colleges, whereas 80 (44.4%) attended private colleges. Concerning residential city, 94 (52.2%) participants were from Lahore, 32 (17.8%) from Sheikhupura, 23 (12.8%) from Chakwal, 22 (12.2%) from Gujranwala, 5 (2.8%) from Mianwali, and 4 (2.2%) from Kasur.

Measures

Perceived academic competition was assessed by *five-item perceived classroom competitiveness scale* (Murayama and Elliot, 2012; Weissman et al., 2022). The scale comprises a 5-point Likert response format ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). In this study, the Cronbach's alpha of the scale is 0.79 which is satisfactory.

Academic burnout was examined using the *Maslach Burnout Inventory–Student Survey (MBI-SS)* developed by Schaufeli et al. (2002). The scale comprises 15 items; 7-point response scale ranging from 0 (*never*) to 6 (*always/every day*). In this study, the Cronbach's alpha of the scale is 0.79, which is satisfactory.

Ethical Considerations and Procedure

The study followed APA 7th edition throughout the procedure; the participants, with respect to the inclusion criteria, were approached in Public and Private Colleges in Lahore, Sheikhupura, Chakwal, Gujranwala, Mianwali and Kasur in person. Institutional permission; however, the names of the institutions are kept confidential as per their request. Out of 204 students, 180 completed the questionnaires while others withdrew from the study. Prior to the data collection, consent form was provided to the students, which stated participation, right of withdrawal and confidentiality of the responses. Upon written signature on the consent form, they were provided with the demographic questionnaire and study instruments. The data collection per participant took almost 15 to 20 minutes. For those under age of 18 (prior to collection of data from students directly), proper parental consent was obtained; therefore, a parent teaching day was selected so that when the parents came to the college, permission could be obtained from them from the authors. After the data collection, the participants' participation was acknowledged. The data were entered in IBM SPSS version 27 for analysis purposes.

Results

Table 1

Correlational Analysis (N = 180)

	1	2
1.Percieved Academic Competition	-	.64***
2.Academic Burnout		-

Note: *** $p < .001$

Correlation analysis revealed a strong, positive, and statistically significant relationship between perceived academic competition and academic burnout among intermediate college students ($r = .64$, $p < .001$, $N = 180$).

Table 2

Predicting Academic Burnout from Academic Competition (N = 180)

	B	SE	β	P	CI 95% (LL - UL)
Constant	14.57	2.40		<.001	9.82 – 19.31
Perceived Academic Competition	1.69	.15	.64	< .001	1.39 – 2.00

*Note:** p < .01, *** p < .001*, $R^2 = .41$, F = 123.62

Simple linear regression analysis was conducted to examine whether perceived academic competition significantly predicted academic burnout among intermediate college students in Pakistan. The results indicated that perceived academic competition was a significant positive predictor of academic burnout, B = 1.69, SE = 0.15, β = .64, t(178) = 11.12, p < .001, 95% CI [1.39, 1.99]. The regression model was statistically significant, F(1, 178) = 123.62, p < .001, and explained 41% of the variance in academic burnout ($R^2 = .41$).

Discussion

The present study aimed to examine the association between perceived academic competition and academic burnout among intermediate college students in Pakistan to fill the gap in the indigenous literature and provide implications for the students. Both hypotheses of the study are supported as the perceived academic competition significantly and positively associates with and predicts academic burnout among intermediate college students in Pakistan. This means students who perceive higher competition among peers, classmates, etc are tend to report greater level of academic burnout. The factors that could be associated with such findings could be consistently comparing grades and achievements with peers, perceiving high pressure to sustain high academic performance. The consistent pressure elevates exhaustion and disengagement, particularly the thinking of outperforming others to get high academic success and be the topper.

The result of the first hypothesis is aligned with recent research that found positive relationship between perceived academic school climate and academic burnout among undergraduate Chinese students. Although the educational level and cultural setting of this study are different, it is relevant evidence of the possibility of a link between a competitive academic climate and students' burnout. A systematic review by Sukamto et al. (2026) also reported academic workload and competitive environments in academic settings among the factors linked to student burnout. These findings are relevant in the cultural context of Pakistani educational setting, as Intermediate education commonly represents a vital phase for students pursuing admission to universities and competitive professional programs.

In Pakistan, high family expectations of adolescents are also an issue that contributes to academic burnout. Previous studies comprising Pakistani students have reported examination demands, financial difficulties, and parental expectations as sources of academic strain (Saeed et al., 2020; Shakeel et al., 2022). Similarly, Jabeen et al. (2024) demonstrated performance-related and psychosocial stressors among college students in Lahore.

As for the second hypothesis, regression analysis demonstrated that perceived academic competition significantly and positively predicted academic burnout. This result indicates that perceived competition may help explain variation in students' burnout scores. In the cultural context of Pakistani academia, academic performance is perceived as a critical pathway to educational and occupational opportunities; students are likely to perceive pressure to sustain high grades and avoid scoring less than their classmates and peers. Javaid et al. (2024) reported that peer competition and financial strain were contributing factors to stress among students in Pakistan. Similarly, Noreen et al. (2021) demonstrated parental and teacher attitudes, examinations, workload and concerns about the education system as the most prevalent factors of academic stress among Pakistani students. In a nutshell, these studies demonstrate that academic distress in Pakistan may stem from several overlapping educational, personal, as well as social pressures.

Implications

The findings indicate that colleges should consider perceptions of competition among students by coming up with academic well-being initiatives. In Pakistan, where academic achievement is usually linked with high family expectations, good university admissions, and career pathways, teachers should foster cooperative learning and individual progress, instead of excessive rankings and comparisons. Parents should be psycho-educated to set realistic expectations and give proper emotional support without associating students' self-worth only with grades. Colleges should also provide facilities and programs like counselling, stress-management workshops, and confidential support for students experiencing academic hurdles.

Conclusion

The study concluded a positive relationship between perceived academic competition and academic burnout among intermediate college students in Pakistan. Furthermore, regression analysis reported that perceived academic competition significantly and positively predicted academic burnout. The study filled the gap in the indigenous literature of Pakistan and highlights the importance of creating educational environments that motivate students' achievement while supporting students' psychological well-being as well.

Limitations and Recommendations

There are few shortcomings of the study that need to be overcome in future research. Firstly, the cross-sectional design does not establish causality, and purposive sampling of 180 students from few cities of Pakistan may not be sufficient evidence to generalize to the wider population of intermediate students in Pakistan. Future studies are therefore required to adopt a longitudinal study design and collect data from more regions of Pakistan. Additionally, the current study, although it discusses cultural factors like high family and parental expectations and poor socioeconomic conditions in Pakistan, did not measure these variables using a standardized questionnaire; therefore, future researchers are recommended to add these variables as mediating factors. Future studies are also suggested to examine the supportive classroom practices and counselling interventions in reducing academic burnout while maintaining healthy academic setting to motivate students.

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