

Emotional Exhaustion and Academic Performance in University Students: Mediating Role of Cynicism

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Abstract

The current study intended to investigate the association between academic burnout (i.e., emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and academic efficacy) and academic performance particularly to examine the mediating role of cynicism between emotional exhaustion and academic performance in university students. In this correlational study, a sample of 300 (men=119; women=181) university students (BS and MS programs) in the age range of 18-29 years ($M=21.45$; $SD=2.14$) was randomly selected from a public sector university in Faisalabad city, Pakistan. Bresno Burnout Scale (Bresno et al., 2007) was used to assess academic burnout whereas the percentages of obtained marks in the last semester/degree program served as the measure of the academic performance of the participants. The results indicated a significant negative correlation between academic burnout and academic performance, and academic burnout was found to be a predictor of academic performance. Moreover, cynicism appeared to be mediating between emotional exhaustion and academic performance. Additionally, significant differences in levels of academic burnout and academic performance were also there concerning the demographic characteristics (i.e. class, gender, family system, and residence). The findings have significant implications for the relevant stakeholders; mental health professionals, students' counselors, authorities of educational institutions, and concerned policymakers.

Keywords: *academic burnout, academic performance, mental health, university students, mediation analysis*

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Introduction and Literature Review

In this universe, education is seen as the foundation for all aspects of life (Farooq et.al, 2011). The level of education a person has determines their prospects in life and level of success. As a result, completing educational duties and developing professional skills ensures that people will live better lives. On the other hand, students' academic success has an impact on their apparent and measurable attitudes in educational settings (Battle & Lewis, 2002). Students enrolled in higher education often face different problems and sometimes feel stressed in dealing with them. Because all students have different gender, personalities, and issues which have a different impact on their education and academic performance accordingly (Dyson & Renk, 2006; Heuchert et al., 2000). Studies conducted to determine the psycho-social

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issues faced by university students highlight four main problems; orientation and habituation, worries about the future and profession, food and accommodation, and quality of education (Doygun & Gulec, 2012).

A recent study, according to *Clinical Psychiatry Times* (2017), found that about 75% of young adults, aged 18 and older, acknowledged feeling hopeless at least one point during their scholastic years. Due to the academic pressure, they face in high school and college, adolescents and young adults are also susceptible to suicidal ideation and self-harm (Vizoso Gómez et al., 2018). Different studies look at the issues that students face, such as feeling overburdened, unhealthy eating patterns, inappropriate learning styles, adjustment problems, psycho-socio-cultural issues, unresolved relationship problems, inappropriate reading habits, disturbed sleep, skipping classes, low self-esteem, and procrastination (Arshad, 2015; Gloria & Rodriguez, 2000; Mohammadi Bytamar et al., 2020; Perera, 2013).

These issues are linked to student's academic performance as it has been found that between 9% and 23% of students struggle with issues related to both their mental health and academic performance (Dagdag et al., 2019). Students' academic performance can be predicted by their study habits, learning styles, family environment, and interactions with other students in the classroom (Shahzadi & Ahmad, 2011). Students grow intellectually and emotionally, and when one's physical and psychological needs are satisfied in ways that are acceptable to society, one might claim that a satisfying condition of an emotional adjustment exists. Uncontrolled emotional responses can therefore seriously limit a young person's capacity for independent choice and behavior. Some students settle into college life smoothly, while others struggle and ultimately quit (Holmbeck & Wandrei, 1993).

Although burnout is an organizational-related concept yet academic burnout of students is also considered to be an important construct because, usually, students are not employed during their enrollment in university and their primary activity is to concentrate on their academic activities only therefore, they specifically need to attend classes, complete assignments, and pass tests to successfully get a degree causing an academic burnout (Saeed & Ahmad, 2020; Salmela-Aro et al., 2008). However, some of the students doing a part-time job in addition to putting in long hours of study could have a significant impact on their stress levels. Full-time students who are also employed in a part-time job are susceptible to stress and sleep deprivation that ultimately increases their vulnerability to constant weariness (Socialstyrelsen, 2003). The findings of a survey conducted on university students in Sweden revealed significant school-related stress among students in many faculties. Here, 50% of the students said they felt pressured every week, around half of the respondents (46.1%) said they felt exhausted every week, and 31% of the respondents said they had problems every month. 90% of the students who reported feeling stressed out said it was because of school. Other signs and symptoms were also discovered, including anxiety, worrying, headache, gastrointestinal discomfort, depression symptoms, attention problems, and physical pain (Bendroth & Servenius, 2017).

The existing literature reveals that such academic, adjustment, emotional, and mental health issues faced by the students lead to emotional exhaustion, which is considered a key component of burnout. This emotional exhaustion results from emotional issues as well as inappropriate emotion regulation, self-regulation, and self-control (Tice & Bratslavsky, 2000). Resultantly, the emotional exhaustion led to a feeling of depersonalization, which may be viewed as the social component of academic burnout, and such a "declining personal accomplishment" can be described as feelings of diminished competence and productivity (Maslach et al., 1997). It is also found that academic and personal stress predict academic burnout in college students.

Moreover, higher levels of life stress and burnout are found in female students and students in their upper years (Saeed & Ahmad, 2020). This academic burnout may be influenced by a combination of interpersonal, future development, self-identity, and academic stress (Lin & Huang, 2014). Thus, emotional exhaustion generates passivity and makes students less energetic. Lack of energy and motivation land them an inclination to believe that they are less capable to accomplish the task or meet deadlines. This skepticism of self-doubt knocking their head saying, “You can’t do it” landed them in Cynicism (Saeed & Ahmad, 2020)

Academic burnout is a three-dimensional reaction to academic stress characterized by feelings of tiredness from work-related expectations, cynicism (or indifference) toward education, and the acquisition of knowledge, along with feelings of failure as a student. Additionally, it is connected to scholastic pressure, particularly the ongoing exhaustion brought on by an excessive workload. There are also noticeable gender differences in experiencing burn-out as numerous studies show that female students experience overall higher education burnout as compared to male students and that pupils with low academic performance experience greater levels of burnout than students who may perform well in school (Saeed & Ahmad, 2020; Salmela et al., 2008). Further, vigor, devotion, and engagement were identified as negatively associated with emotional tiredness, cynicism, and diminished professional performance. Additionally, it was found that burnout was more common among older, male, and 2-year program participants than it was among younger, female, and 4-year program participants, respectively (Uludag & Yaratana, 2010). Similar findings were also evident in a study conducted in Pakistan (Saeed & Ahmad, 2020).

Burnout is commonly characterized by depersonalization, cynicism, depression, boredom, stubbornness, loss of self-awareness, and feelings of emptiness, obsessions, and anxiety (Honzák, 2013), and academic burnout is considered a serious issue that is linked to low academic achievement (Yang, 2004). Therefore, it is found that university students who were experiencing academic burnout had feelings of irritability, frustration, detachment, exhaustion, use up, and pessimism related to academic activities (Saeed et al., 2022). Furthermore, the students with a high level of academic burnout performed poorly in academics where cynicism significantly mediated between emotional exhaustion and academic achievement while academic success partially but significantly mediated between cynicism and academic efficacy (Salanova et al., 2010).

Likewise, Ghadampour et al. (2016) found that academic burnout was negatively associated with academic engagement and academic performance in medical students. Similar results were observed in another study by Akbay and Akbay (2016) in a sample of Turkish university students where academic burnout was revealed to have a detrimental direct impact on academic achievement, and a causal association between academic burnout and academic performance. Parallel to this, in a sample of South African university students, Kotzé and Kleynhans (2013) found that burnout particularly emotional exhaustion and cynicism were significant predictors of academic achievement.

Winga et al. (2016) also found a significant association between academic burnout and academic achievement in adolescents in Kenya. It was revealed that students who received low grades in their coursework were more pessimistic about their academic performance and less productive than high performers. Additionally, low achievers reported more burnout as compared to high achievers at school. In another study conducted in Kenya, Oyoo et al. (2020) found a significant negative correlation between academic burnout and academic accomplishment in adolescents as the participants with a lower level of academic burnout had a higher level of academic accomplishment. Interestingly, it was also found that emotional exhaustion and cynicism

were not significant predictors of academic success. The only factor that positively and significantly predicted academic success was academic efficacy.

Duru et al. (2014) found a significant negative association between academic burnout and academic accomplishment. Moreover, academic efficacy was a significant predictor of academic accomplishment in the students. Findings of another study conducted by Pouratashi (2017) revealed that academic achievement had a negative and significant association with the levels of emotional tiredness, academic disinterest, and academic inefficacy in a sample of Iranian college students. Moreover, academic inefficacy also accounted for the majority of variations in the academic performance of the students.

Conclusively, it has been established that high levels of exhaustion and cynicism significantly decrease the academic performance of university students (Palacio Sañudo et al., 2012; Saeed et al., 2022). Thus, in a recent meta-analytical study, Madigan and Curran (2021) determined the connection between academic burnout and academic success compiling the findings of 29 studies ($N=109,396$). The burnout demonstrated a substantial inverse association with academic achievement where each of the three burnout symptoms (i.e., exhaustion, cynicism, and decreased efficacy) were found to be significantly associated with academic success. Although there was some evidence that the link between academic achievement, decreased efficacy, and burnout was mitigated by the instruments used to measure burnout, yet the data demonstrated a vivid negative association between burnout and academic performance in high school, college, and university students. However, contrary to the above-mentioned findings, March-Amengual et al. (2022) found that although academic burnout was found to be more common than psychological discomfort in the students yet academic achievement was unaffected by psychological hardships and exhaustion.

Rationale of the Study

Since the above-cited studies are found inconclusive, as some of the researchers (e.g., Madigan & Curran, 2021; Oyoo et al., 2020) found emotional exhaustion significantly associated with lower academic performance while some of them (e.g., March-Amengual et al., 2022) found no significant association between these constructs. Moreover, there is also a need to add empirical findings to the existing body of indigenous literature to determine the relationship between these constructs. Therefore, the current study was designed to reinvestigate the association between emotional exhaustion and academic performance as well as to investigate the mediating role of cynicism between these constructs in university students of Pakistan to fill the gap in indigenous literature.

Objectives of the Study

1. To investigate the association between academic burnout (i.e., emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and academic efficacy) and academic performance in university students
2. To examine the mediating role of cynicism between emotional exhaustion and academic performance in university students

Hypotheses of the Study

It was hypothesized that.

1. There would be a significant negative relationship between academic burnout and academic performance in university students.
2. Academic burnout would significantly predict academic performance in university students.
3. Cynicism would significantly mediate between emotional exhaustion and academic performance in university students.

Method

Research Design

A correlational research design was used in the current study using survey method.

Participants

A sample of 300 students enrolled in a public sector university in Faisalabad, Pakistan, was chosen (50 students from each year of the BS and MS programs) through a stratified random sampling technique where each year of BS (4-year program) and MS (2-year program) served as independent strata. In this way, all male and female students enrolled in BS (4-year program) and MS (2-year program) programs in the selected university were included in the study whereas, the students enrolled in programs other than the BS and MS programs at the chosen university as well as students enrolled in other universities were excluded from the current study.

Instruments

Burnout scale for university students: Since, academic burnout is operationally defined as a three-dimensional syndrome which includes emotion exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment (Maslach et al., 1986) therefore, the Burnout Scale for University Students (Breso et al., 2007) was used to measure academic burnout in the participants. This scale examines the extent of academic burnout. This scale consists of 15 items assessing the traits of academic efficacy, cynicism, and emotional exhaustion. Participants had to rate on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). The sub-scales; Emotional Stress, Cynicism, and Academic Efficacy have strong internal consistency i.e., 0.70, 0.82, and 0.75 respectively.

Academic performance: The academic performance was operationally defined as “the percentage of obtained marks of the selected students”. Thus, in the current study, academic performance was measured through the percentage of obtained marks in the last semester or last degree (whichever was applicable).

Procedure and Ethical Considerations

First of all, formal requisite permissions for data collection were taken from the concerned authorities. The participants were selected as per the technique discussed earlier and they were briefed about the aim and nature of this study. Formal written consent was obtained from them with an assurance of maintenance of confidentiality, anonymity, and privacy, along with the right to withdraw at any stage of this study. The participants were then given the study instruments and asked to complete the same. This process took almost 25 to 30 minutes to complete. They were duly thanked for their volunteer participation in the study. The data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) *PROCESS* macro v3.3 (Hayes, 2019).

Results

Table 1

Internal Consistency of the Burnout Scale for University Students (N=300)

Measure	No. of Items	α
Burnout Scale (Total)	15	.82
Emotional Stress	5	.87
Cynicism	4	.89
Academic Efficacy	6	.82

The data given in Table 1 depicts a strong internal consistency of the Academic Burnout Scale for University Students as well its sub-scales in the sample of the current study.

Table 2

Summary of Inter-correlations, Means, and Standard Deviations of the Scores on Academic Burnout Scale and Academic Performance in University Students (N=300)

Variables	1	2	3	4	5
1. Cy	-	.46**	.09	.79***	-.22*
2. EX		-	.08	.86***	-.27*
3. AE			-	.26**	.41**
4. BOtotal				-	-.19*
5. AP					-
6. <i>M</i>	10.33	14.73	9.51	34.57	46.39
7. <i>SD</i>	6.91	8.43	3.13	13.59	7.85

*** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$

Note. CY=Cynicism; EX=Emotional Exhaustion; AE=Academic Efficacy; BOtotal=Total of Academic Burnout; AP=Academic Performance.

Table 2 reveals that emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and academic burnout (as a whole) are negatively correlated with academic performance while there is a positive correlation between academic efficacy and academic performance in the students. In simple words, with an increase in emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and academic burnout (as a whole) academic performance decreases whereas, with an increase in academic efficacy the academic performance of the students increases.

Table 3

Hierarchical Regression Analyses for Predictors of Academic Performance in University Students (N= 300)

Predictors		Unstandardized		Standardized	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i> <
		<i>B</i>	<i>Std. Error</i>	β		
Step 1	($R=.135$, $\Delta R^2 = .001$)	53.12	6.13		8.67	.001
	Class	-2.62	1.56	-.15	-1.69	.043
	Semester	.99	.48	.19	2.06	.041
Step 2	($R=.139$, $\Delta R^2 = -.004$)	53.13	6.36		8.35	.001
	Semester	.98	.48	.19	2.03	.044
Step 3	($R=.454$, $\Delta R^2 = .179$)	42.69	5.95		7.17	.001
	Class	-3.24	1.44	-.18	-2.26	.025
	Semester	1.38	.44	.28	3.12	.002
	AE	1.09	.13	.44	8.19	.001

Note. AE=Academic Efficacy. Only significant results are presented in each step.

In order to identify the determinants of academic performance in university students, a hierarchical regression analysis was carried out. In Step, I, the personal characteristics of the

participants (i.e., gender, age, class, and semester) were included. Step II consisted of the familial characteristics of the participants (family system and family monthly income). While in Step III, academic burnout (i.e., cynicism, emotional exhaustion, academic efficacy reverse, burnout) was entered. The data given in Table 3 indicates that the semester and academic efficacy of the participants are significant positive predictors of academic performance in university students whereas the class of the participants is a significant negative predictor of students' academic performance. Thus, the more academic efficacy the more likelihood of better academic performance would be there. Moreover, with the advancement in the semester of the class, the academic performance of the students gets better. However, the higher the academic level (i.e., MS) the lower the academic performance of the students is predicted as compared to the lower academic level (i.e., BS).

Table 4

Direct Effect of Emotional Exhaustion and Cynicism on Academic Performance in University Students (N=300)

<i>Antecedents</i>	<i>Consequents</i>					
	<i>Cynicism</i>			<i>Academic Achievement</i>		
	<i>Coeff.</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i> <	<i>Coeff.</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i> <
Emotion Exhaustion	.38	.04	.01	-.07	.06	.05
Cynicism				.04	.07	.05
	$R^2=.214$ $F(298)= 81.00, p<.01$			$R^2=.024$ $F(297)= .772, p<.05$		

Note. Coeff.=standardized regression coefficient.

The results of direct effects depicted that emotional exhaustion was a significant positive predictor of cynicism and academic performance. Furthermore, cynicism also appeared to be a positive predictor of academic performance in university students.

Table 5

Indirect Effect of Cynicism between Emotional Exhaustion and Academic Performance in University Students (N=300)

<i>Mediation</i>	<i>Effect</i>	<i>BootSE</i>	<i>95%BootCI</i>	
			<i>BootLL</i>	<i>BootUL</i>
Cynicism	.015	.030	-.043	.069

Note. Effect=standardized regression coefficient; BootCI=bootstrapped confidence interval; BootLL=bootstrapped BootLL=bootstrapped lower limit; BootUL=bootstrapped upper limit.

The results of the indirect effect showed that cynicism is a significant mediator between emotional exhaustion and academic performance. This indicated that an increase in emotional exhaustion tends to decrease academic performance while a decrease in cynicism, in turn, increases the academic performance of university students.

Discussion

The current study aimed to investigate the association between academic burnout (particularly emotional exhaustion) and academic performance and to examine the mediating role of cynicism between emotional exhaustion and academic performance in university students. Due to academic burnout, which is linked to students' academic success, university students are more vulnerable to having trouble controlling their emotions. The existing literature suggests that academic burnout particularly emotional exhaustion is one of the underlying factors that negatively affect the academic performance of students (e.g., Oyoo et.al, 2020; Saeed et al., 2022). However, some of the researchers (e.g., March-Amengual et al., 2022) found no significant association between these constructs. Moreover, there was also a need to add empirical findings to the existing body of indigenous literature. Therefore, it was decided to examine the relationship between, academic burnout, and academic performance in university students. For this purpose, a sample of 300 university students was selected as discussed earlier in detail. Academic burnout was measured through Bresó Academic Burnout Scale (Bresó et al. 2007) while the percentage of obtained marks of the selected students was used as a measure of their academic performance.

The first objective of this study was to investigate the association between academic burnout (i.e., emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and academic efficacy) and academic performance in university students. The existing literature suggests that academic burnout and academic performance of the students are significantly and negatively correlated, and the level of their cynicism predicts their academic achievement as Uludag and Yaratán (2010) found that a high level of cynicism was related to a low level of academic achievement and a reduced level of academic efficacy. Thus, it was hypothesized that there would be a significant negative relationship between academic burnout and academic performance, and academic burnout would significantly predict academic performance in university students.

Results of this study revealed that emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and academic Burnout (as a whole) were negatively correlated with academic performance ($r=-.27, p<.05$; $r=-.22, p<.05$; $r=-.15, p<.05$ respectively) while there was a positive correlation between academic efficacy and academic performance ($r=.41, p<.01$) in the students indicating that with the increase in emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and academic burnout (as a whole) academic performance decreases whereas, with the increase in academic efficacy, the academic performance of the students increases. Moreover, the semester and academic efficacy of the participants appeared as significant positive predictors of academic performance ($p<.05$; $p<.001$ respectively) in university students whereas the class of the participants is a significant negative predictor ($p<.05$) of students' academic performance suggesting that the more academic efficacy the more likelihood of better academic performance would be there. Moreover, with the advancement in the semester of the class, the academic performance of the students gets better. However, the higher the academic level (i.e., MS) the lower the academic performance of the students is predicted as compared to the lower academic level (i.e., BS).

These results concur with a significant body of existing literature that has documented a significant negative correlation between academic exhaustion and academic success (e.g., Ghadampou et al., 2016; Madigan & Curran, 2021; Oyoo et al., 2020; Pouratashi, 2017; Saeed et al., 2022). It has previously been found that university students use to feel overburdened, have inappropriate learning styles, and have certain adjustment problems (Arshad, 2015; Mohammadi Bytamar et al., 2020; Perera, 2013), and these issues are linked to student's academic performance as it has already been found that between 9% and 23% of students struggle with issues related to both their mental health and academic performance (Dagdag et al., 2019). Moreover, in another

prior study, 50% of university students reported experiencing pressure, and 46% said they felt exhausted (Bendroth & Servenius, 2017). Since burnout is commonly characterized by depersonalization, cynicism, depression, boredom, stubbornness, loss of self-awareness, and feelings of emptiness, and anxiety (Honzák, 2013) therefore, most probably is negatively associated with academic performance in prior research as well as in the current study. Thus, the findings of some studies (e.g., e.g., March-Amengual et al., 2022) suggesting an insignificant association between these variables might have involved some other factors to be explored and studied in detail in the future.

The second objective of this study was to examine the mediating role of cynicism between emotional exhaustion and academic performance in university students. In this regard, it was hypothesized that cynicism would significantly mediate between emotional exhaustion and academic performance in university students. The results of direct effects depicted that emotional exhaustion was a significant positive predictor of cynicism ($p < .01$) and academic performance ($p < .05$), and cynicism also appeared to be a positive predictor of academic performance ($p < .05$) in university students. Furthermore, results of the indirect effect showed that cynicism is a significant mediator between emotional exhaustion and academic performance suggesting that an increase in emotional exhaustion tends to decrease academic performance while a decrease in cynicism, in turn, increases the academic performance of university students. These findings are also consistent with the existing literature as Salanova et al. (2010) found that the students with a high level of academic burnout performed poorly in academics where cynicism significantly mediated between emotional exhaustion and academic achievement while academic success partially but significantly mediated between the cynicism and academic efficacy.

Conclusion

The findings of the current study revealed a significant inverse association between academic burnout and academic performance in university students of Pakistan. It was also revealed that cynicism significantly mediates between both variables.

Implications of the Study

The findings of the current study have imperative implications for the consideration of all the concerned stakeholders; teachers, advisers, university administration, and students' counselors. In the framework of developmental and preventive guidance, some students might have higher levels of burnout and lower levels of academic performance; thus, they might need help and support in academic settings. The early identification of academic burnout, depersonalization, and a reduced sense of accomplishment would certainly result in the timely provision of necessary psychological help to the students as well as requisite precautionary measures can be taken. Therefore, before students feel less successful and less capable based on lower academic success, academic staff, and advisers might recognize this warning signal, assume an active role, and implement requisite strategies collaborating with counseling professionals. In this way, the students can be equipped to develop a sense of coherence for dealing effectively with academic burnout ultimately enhancing their academic performance.

Limitations & Suggestions

Findings of the current study in terms of correlations and predictions are based on quantitative analyses and should be interpreted accordingly. In the future, exploratory or qualitative research can be more helpful in better understanding the nature of academic burnout and exploration of determinants of academic performance in university students. A cross-sectional research design was used in the current research. In the future, it is suggested to use a longitudinal research design

which may offer other important insights about the study variables at different ages and academic stages. Sample of this study comprised one Public Sector University which may limit the degree of generalization. Since academic burnout may vary with contextual factors, it is therefore suggested that in the future, data should be collected from diverse contexts to generalize the findings with more certainty.

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