



Psychological effects of competitive exams on student identity and self-worth

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Abstract

The aspect of competitive exams has come to be a hallmark of the contemporary education systems, especially when it comes to countries such as India that have limited opportunities in addition to high population density which compounds the academic competition. This article examines the psychological implications of competitive tests on identity development and self-esteem of the students. The study applies the work of secondary sources based on the recent research to explore the impact of long exposure to exam-related settings on mental health, emotional stability, and self-perception. Available literature indicates that competitive exams cause a lot of stress, anxiety, and depression among students. The empirical evidence shows that the stress caused by exams is not only the situational stress but also the long-term psychological issue that influences the thought process, behavior, and emotional control. An empirical investigation carried out in 2022 found that among students who are taking exams to gain competitive advantages, it is true that there are always stress, pressure and anxiety. Moreover, the recent research results indicate that there is a close association between stress and self-esteem, and a greater level of stress is linked to changes in self-worth. The paper has presented an argument that competitive exams have a detrimental impact on identity distortion where academic success is equated to personal worth. The expectations of the society are internalized by students and this creates a performance-based identity structure. Loss or poor performance usually leads to inferiority, inadequacy, and low self-esteem. It is also found that excessive competition leads to decrease in creativity and encourages self-evaluation on a comparison basis, which further harms the psychological well-being. There are also the socio-cultural influences like parental expectations, peer comparison, and media narratives that contribute to psychological distress. A considerable percentage of students with high-pressure settings such as coaching hubs also report severe stress symptoms and long-term mental health effects such as depression and burnout. Such experiences do not just influence academic performance but also define the identity of students in the long run and their satisfaction with life. The conclusion of this paper is that competitive examinations, though meant to achieve merit, tend to produce a psychological atmosphere that adversely affects student identity and self-esteem. It highlights the necessity of reformation in the educational system, support systems in the form of mental health and alternative evaluation practices to encourage the holistic approach.

Keywords: Competitive examinations, Student identity, Self-worth, Stress, Anxiety, Mental health, Academic pressure, Self-esteem

Introduction

The emergence of competitive examinations as a leading form of academic assessment has radically changed the educational landscape in the world. The competitive exams are used in some countries like India, China and South Korea as barriers to higher education and jobs. Such tests are not just academic tests but potent social institutions that define the lives, dreams, and identities of students. Personal growth and intellectual development have always been linked with the education. Nevertheless, the growing popularity of standardized testing has made the focus on learning change to performance. This leads to the students being placed in high-stress situations where failure is more determined by the grades they obtain in exams. This has serious psychological consequences especially during the adolescent and early adulthood stages when identity and self-worth are yet to take shape.

The identity concept means a sense of self in an individual in terms of beliefs, values, and personal attributes. Self-worth on

the other hand refers to how an individual evaluates his or her worth or value. Both constructs are significantly impacted by social experiences, even learning sectors. When academic performance is held as the main concept of success, students start to base their self-esteem on the outcome of their exams. According to the modern studies, the obsessive emphasis on the performance on exams as the only indicator of success may lead to the distortion of the self-worth ^[1]. This distortion produces a performance-based identity where students identify themselves more through their academic performances or failures. This kind of identity is fragile in nature, because it requires the validation of others instead of the self-acceptance. Psychological stress that comes with competitive exams is complex. It involves academic pressure, the fear of failure, the lack of optimism about the future, and social comparison. Recent studies have shown that a high percentage of students develop high anxiety and emotional distress in preparation of exams. As an example, a report has shown that close to 30

percent of students in the high-stress academic setting have severe symptoms of stress [2]. Such conditions are further worsened by the expectations of parents, social norms and media images of success.

Parental expectations are also important in determining the attitude of students towards competitive exams. Academic success is regarded as a way of social mobility and economic stability in most cultures. As a result, parents of children usually exert so much pressure on them to get good results in their exams. The pressure to do great may be too much, as one of the studies notes [3]. This pressure is not external only but also internalized by students, which causes self-inflicted stress and perfectionism.

The other important consideration is that the exam system is competitive. The stakes are very high with many candidates vying on the chances which are few. This establishes the atmosphere of constant comparison, with students comparing themselves to other students. These comparisons tend to create a sense of inefficiency and inferiority, particularly in those who have trouble keeping up with high-performing peers. Competitive exams have a psychological effect that goes beyond stress and anxiety. It has a wide range of impacts on the life of students such as their thinking capacity, emotional state, and social life. Students who are going through the process of preparing to take competitive exams are found to be afflicted with sleep disturbances, social isolation and lack of motivation [4]. These effects do not only serve to hamper academic performance, but also lead to mental health problems in the long term. Moreover, competitive exams affect the career decisions and life paths of students. Most students pursue subjects of study according to requirements of exams and not out of personal interests or passions. Such a discrepancy between personal desires and the demands of the society may result in a sense of discontent and unfulfillment in the adulthood.

The connection between competitive exams and self-worth is especially complicated. On the one hand, passing exams may enhance self-esteem and confidence. Conversely, failure or poor performance may be disastrous to the self-image of students. In severe situations, the students might grow up feeling worthless and hopeless and this can result in depression and other mental illnesses. The recent studies note the importance of such psychological constructs as emotional intelligence and self-efficacy in alleviating stress during exams. More emotionally intelligent students who have stronger self-efficacy can cope with stress and have a positive self-image [5]. This implies that psychological resilience is an important factor in defining the way students react to competitive exam environments. Besides the individual factors, there are institutional and systemic factors that increase the psychological effects of competitive exams. The issue is aggravated by the absence of proper mental health care in schools. Counselling services and stress management programs are not available to many students and they handle the pressure on their own. The situation of competitive exams was also exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The inconvenience

of education, the inability to predict the time of exams, and the need to spend more time studying online added more stress to students. These developments underscored the necessity to have more adaptable and inclusive evaluation procedures that are student-centered.

Social comparison theory, self-determination theory and identity theory are some of the psychological theories whose theoretical frameworks can be utilized in understanding the psychological impacts of competitive exams. The social comparison theory is a theory that describes how people compare themselves with others. Self-determination theory focuses on the significance of autonomy, competency and relatedness in promoting intrinsic motivation and well-being. Identity theory dwells on the importance of social roles and expectations in the development of individuals sense of self.

Therefore, competitive exams are not only academic events but strong psychological experiences which define students identity and self-esteem. Although they are also valuable instruments of determining merit, their influence on mental health and self-growth cannot be overlooked. The paper aims to address these problems in more detail basing on the recent findings and the theoretical background to provide the complete picture of the psychological impact of competitive examinations.

Research objectives

- To examine the psychological impact of competitive examinations on students.
- To analyze the relationship between exam stress and student self-worth.
- To explore how competitive exams influence identity formation.
- To identify socio-cultural factors contributing to exam-related stress.
- To suggest strategies for improving student mental well-being.

Literature review

Recent studies point to an increasing worry about the psychological implications of competitive examinations. An empirical study conducted in 2022 revealed that the stress, pressure, and anxiety persist during the time of competitive examination preparation among students, which suggests the systemic character of the issue [6]. The research underlines the fact that the stress of exams does not concern only certain groups of students but students of various levels.

A study by Patel and Sheth (2026) investigated the connection between stress and self-esteem in students about to take competitive examination. The results showed that there was a significant correlation between stress and self-esteem indicating that academic pressure is highly associated with psychological well-being [7]. The research also emphasized the part that study techniques and family support had in the determination of the degree of stress.

The other significant research (2025) on Indian school students examined the extended effects of the competitive exam culture

such as the mental health, the financial strain, and the personal growth [7]. The results show that competitive exams have a wide spread implication outside academic performance, which has an impact on the general quality of life of the students.

A study carried out in 2024 has shown that competitive exams increase anxiety, reduce creativity and cause feelings of inferiority among students [8]. These results indicate that the exam system does not only have a negative impact on mental health, but restricts the intellectual and creative potential of students.

The research conducted on high-pressure settings like Kota has shown disturbing statistics on mental health of students. It has been reported that a large percentage of students are severely stressed, have sleep problems, and are emotionally unstable [9]. These results demonstrate the necessity of systematic reform of the education system.

Also, the literature on student well-being proposes that competitive exams also lead to social isolation and disrupted schedules, which further worsen the psychological distress [10]. Imbalance between personal and academic life is a significant contributor towards mental health problems.

In general, in the literature, it is stated that competitive exams influence the psychological well-being of students, their identity, and self-worth significantly. Although there are certain students who build resilience and coping strategies, a lot of students find themselves unable to cope with the pressures of exam preparation.

Methodology

The study is founded on the analysis of secondary data. Relevant data were obtained out of:

- Peer-reviewed journals
- Research articles and conference proceedings
- Institutional and governmental reports
- Psychological research and literature.

The research is descriptive and analytical in nature, which synthesizes the results of various resources to comprehend the psychological effects of competitive exams. There was no major data collection.

Description

In this analysis we examine the psychological consequences of competitive examinations by logically responding to the research goals: psychological impact, self-worth, identity formation, and socio-cultural influences. The discussion is founded on the conclusions of the synthesized findings of the new secondary sources.

a) Psychological impact of competitive examinations

The former focuses on wider psychological implications of competitive exams. As it has always been demonstrated, this type of exams does not pose any academic problem but a chronic stress environment. Competitive exams, unlike regular assessments, are high stakes, and they may or may not access tertiary education and career paths.

According to scholarly evidence, stress associated with exams is not sporadic but cumulative. Students who study in the long run suffer cognitive overload, emotional weariness and behavioral withdrawal. This is in line with the fact that in competitive exams, stress, pressure and anxiety. are always present.

Table 1: Major psychological effects of competitive exams

Dimension	Symptoms observed	Psychological outcome
Cognitive	Poor concentration, memory lapses	Reduced academic efficiency
Emotional	Anxiety, irritability, fear of failure	Emotional instability
Behavioral	Social withdrawal, sleep disruption	Isolation and burnout
Physiological	Fatigue, headaches, insomnia	Chronic stress response

These results show that competitive exams are also stress systems of a psychological nature, that they affect various aspects of student well-being at the same time.

b) Competitive exams and student identity formation

The second goal is concerned with identity formation. The concept of identity especially adolescence and early adulthood is very prone to the external validation system. Competitive

exams establish a system in which grades are the first point of identification.

Learners absorb an identity framework that is based on a rank, in which success would mean superiority and failure would mean being inadequate. This is the same as saying that the obsessive emphasis on exam scores. can cause a skewed view of self-esteem.

Table 2: Identity transformation under competitive exam pressure

Stage of preparation	Identity orientation	Psychological risk
Initial Stage	Aspirational identity	Moderate pressure
Intensive Stage	Performance-based identity	High stress, comparison
Post-Result Stage	Outcome-dependent identity	Identity crisis (if failure)

This model demonstrates that identity is becoming more externalized and losing its intrinsic self-concept towards

externally assessed value. These identity formations are volatile by nature as they are based on changing results.

c) Relationship between exam stress and self-worth

The third goal will look into the impact of stress on self-worth. Studies have shown that there is a reciprocal relationship between stress and self-esteem. Stress reduces self-esteem and low self-esteem increases stress.

Competitive students also tend to compare themselves with others and as a result, they tend to evaluate themselves negatively. The internal conversation changes to What can I learn? to Am I better than others? - a change which hurts the intrinsic motivation.

Table 3: Stress self-worth relationship

Level of stress	Self-perception	Behavioral outcome
Low	Positive self-worth	Confidence, engagement
Moderate	Conditional self-worth	Performance anxiety
High	Negative self-worth	Withdrawal, self-doubt
Extreme	Worthlessness	Depression, burnout

Table 4: Socio-cultural determinants of exam stress

Factor	Mechanism of influence	Psychological effect
Family expectations	Pressure for achievement	Anxiety, fear of failure
Peer comparison	Rank-based evaluation	Inferiority complex
Coaching systems	Intensive schedules	Burnout, exhaustion
Social media	Idealized success narratives	Unrealistic self-expectations

All these contribute to an extremely stressful ecosystem, in which students are constantly tested and are not often helped on an emotional level.

e) Long-term psychological consequences

The last dimension takes the analysis further than short-term impact. The psychological effects of competitive exams are long-lasting and affect the personality, life satisfaction, and outlook.

Students under long-term stress will develop:

- Chronic anxiety disorders
- Reduced resilience
- Fear of future challenges
- The loss of intrinsic motivation

Table 5: Short-term vs Long-term effects

Time frame	Effects observed	Impact on life
Short-term	Anxiety, sleep disturbance	Reduced performance
Medium-term	Emotional instability	Academic disengagement
Long-term	Depression, burnout	Low life satisfaction

These results support the fact that competitive exams are not solitary academic experiences but are shaping psychological experiences.

Synthesis of findings

In line with the research objectives, it was found that:

- Competitive exams have a serious impact on mental health in cognitive, emotional and behavioral aspects.
- They foster a performance-based identity and minimize self-concept to academic results.

This indicates that competitive exams tend to create conditional self-worth wherein a student is only able to appreciate themselves when they succeed.

d) Socio-cultural factors intensifying psychological stress

The fourth goal emphasizes the external factors. Competitive exams do not exist in a vacuum; they are incorporated into a social and cultural context which enhances the pressure.

Key contributing factors

- **Parental expectations:** The academic achievement is connected to family respect and social-economic mobility.
- **Peer competition:** Constant comparison strengthens inadequacies.
- **Coaching culture:** The institutional cultures are conducive to extreme discipline and pressure.
- **Media narratives:** Success stories set unrealistic standards.

- Stress and self-worth have a close and complicated relationship which can result in conditional self-esteem.
- The socio-cultural pressures add to the psychological distress making it systemic as opposed to individual.
- The impacts are long-term, and they influence personality and future contentment in life.

Conclusion

Although competitive exams are meant to assess merit and distribute opportunities, they do have serious psychological effects on the students. This study also shows that the high level of pressure that comes with such exams has a negative impact on the identity formation and self-esteem of students. The results show that stress, anxiety, and depression are not uncommon among students who are taking competitive exams, and that long-term effects of these factors on mental health and personal development are significant.

The paper has noted that competitive exams tend to foster the culture of a performance-oriented identity, in which students associate their self-esteem with academic achievement. This reduced interpretation of success may bring about inadequacy and inferiority especially in individuals who fail to attain desired results. Besides, psychosocial factors like parental expectations and social norms also contribute to further worsening of the psychological distress.

The articles consulted in this paper emphasize the importance of a more holistic approach to education. Although competitive tests are very crucial in determining the academic capability of an individual, they are not to be used as the only measure of the value of the student or his or her potential. Learning institutions should focus on mental wellness and offer support networks to enable students to deal with stress caused by exams.

Summing up, educational changes are urgently required that would combine academic and psychological health. It can be achieved through implementing alternative assessment tools, fostering emotional intelligence and mental health support, which can help to make the educational environment more supportive and inclusive. Not just will such changes help students to feel better, but they will also develop a healthier and stronger sense of identity and self-worth.

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