

Exploring the Impact of Perceived Academic Stress on Social Competence: The Moderating Role of Co-Curricular Activities

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Abstract: The objective of this study was to explore the relationship between Perceived Academic Stress (PAS) and Social Competence (SC) and the moderating role of Co-curricular activities between PAS and SC. The study was quantitative in nature, and the research design of this study was a purposive sampling technique. For this purpose, Perception of Academic Stress (PAS) (Bedewy & Gabriel, 2015) and Multidimensional Social Competence Scale (MSCS) (Trevisan et al., 2018) were used, whereas co-curricular activities were identified through a demographic form. A total of 300 participants were recruited based on inclusion and exclusion criteria. All these participants were university students residing in Karachi, Pakistan. The students were from both private and government universities, like the University of Karachi, Sir Syed University of Engineering and Technology, ILMA University, and Bahria University. The hypothesis of this study was that there would be a relationship between PAS and SC. Another hypothesis of the study was that the co-curricular activities play a moderating role between PAS and SC. The results were analysed through SPSS 22 using regression and moderation analysis. Thus, the results clearly showed that the first hypothesis was accepted. This means the individuals who have elevated academic stress had greater social competence as they put effort into establishing peer networks or improving communication skills to successfully handle stress. However, the relationship between PAS and one of the subscales of SC, verbal communication, is negative. Another hypothesis was rejected, but the moderation on the context of verbal conversation skills was found to be significant. Academic stress impacts more than achievement; it fosters social-emotional growth and interpersonal development among students.

Keywords: Co-curricular Activities, Perceived Academic Stress, Social Competence

Introduction

Background

Education is an essential sector of every country, but when we talk about developing countries, it's the most integral part of every citizen's life. This study is based on one of the developing countries, known as Pakistan. The parents and teachers of this country motivate their youth to focus on education and achieve good grades in order to achieve milestones in life. The motivation extends to the point where the students start feeling pressured by their guardians. They encounter academic challenges, heavy coursework, strict deadlines, and high parental expectations. Despite the academic pressure faced by students, its impact on social competence is still unexplored. As the students in Pakistan face psychological pressure from scholastic challenges investigating the impact of students' stress on their social behaviour and relationships is important (Ahfaf & Elsaadi, 2025).

Recent studies by Turi et al. (2025) and Ansari et al. (2025) indicate that stress might adversely affect students' social functioning. Nonetheless, research indicates that stress may elicit adaptive measures such as seeking social support, group discussions, etc. However, there is little evidence for this. Participation in extracurricular activities among students is associated with improved mental health and increased social engagement (Papavasileiou et al., 2025). However, there is little evidence on whether such a factor creates a link between Perceived Academic Stress (PAS) and Social Competence (SC). This is commonly noticed in Pakistan, as Co-curricular activities are often seen as nonessential or undervalued.

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Literature Review

University students are a vital part of Pakistan's human capital. As the future of the country depends on them, their emotional stability, social progress, and success are crucial for the nation's development. However, they experience frequent academic demands, including quizzes, assignments, heavy coursework, presentations, and examinations. These stressors can alleviate perceived academic stress (PAS). The perception and reaction of the students to such factors contribute to what experts call Perceived Academic Stress (PAS). It includes cognitive and emotional instability that people experience due to academic challenges. Such students often encounter low motivation, impaired focus, and face difficulties with emotional stability. It has been concluded that the increase in PAS often leads to inadequate emotional control, heightened anxiety, and indecisiveness (Alwhaibi et al., 2023). Furthermore, academic stress is a pressing issue in Pakistan, particularly among students in competitive academic environments where high expectations, peer pressure, and performance anxiety are prevalent (Shakeel et al., 2022).

Conversely, academic life is not just a cause of stress; it also fosters significant social development. A fundamental developmental notion that arises in this context is Social Competence (SC). Social competence pertains to the capacity to engage successfully with people via abilities such as empathy, emotional management, communication, and collaboration. This suggests people with heightened stress levels tend to use adaptive methods to eradicate its adverse impacts. For university students, such methods involve certain projects and events, and enhance communication skills, which foster the development of SC. Al-Dwaikat et al. (2020) assert that students under significant academic pressure often enhance their social skills by depending on support networks and engaging in heightened interpersonal interactions. It similarly discovered that social competence enables students to navigate academic problems more effectively, hence strengthening the link between PAS and SC (Worley et al., 2023).

The capacity for stress to positively impact social development is further enhanced when analysed in conjunction with co-curricular activities, which function as dynamic avenues for skill acquisition outside the academic curriculum. Co-curricular activities include organised, often optional, pursuits such as debate, acting, athletics, community service, and academic organisations. These activities provide students with practical experiences to develop leadership, empathy, cooperation, and public speaking—fundamental components of social competency. Papavasileiou et al. (2025) discovered that children participating in co-curricular activities had improved emotional intelligence, problem-solving skills, and teamwork capabilities (Javed et al., 2023). Similarly, it highlighted the influence of continuous involvement in community outreach on enhancing students' confidence and communication abilities. Lewandowska & Węziak-Białowolska (2023) assert that students engaged in roles requiring communication and collaboration, such as debate, theatre, or event planning, typically enhance their social competence more than those involved in roles centred on technical skills or background knowledge. This distinction underscores the significance of students' engagement styles concerning their participation in extracurricular activities.

Theoretical Framework

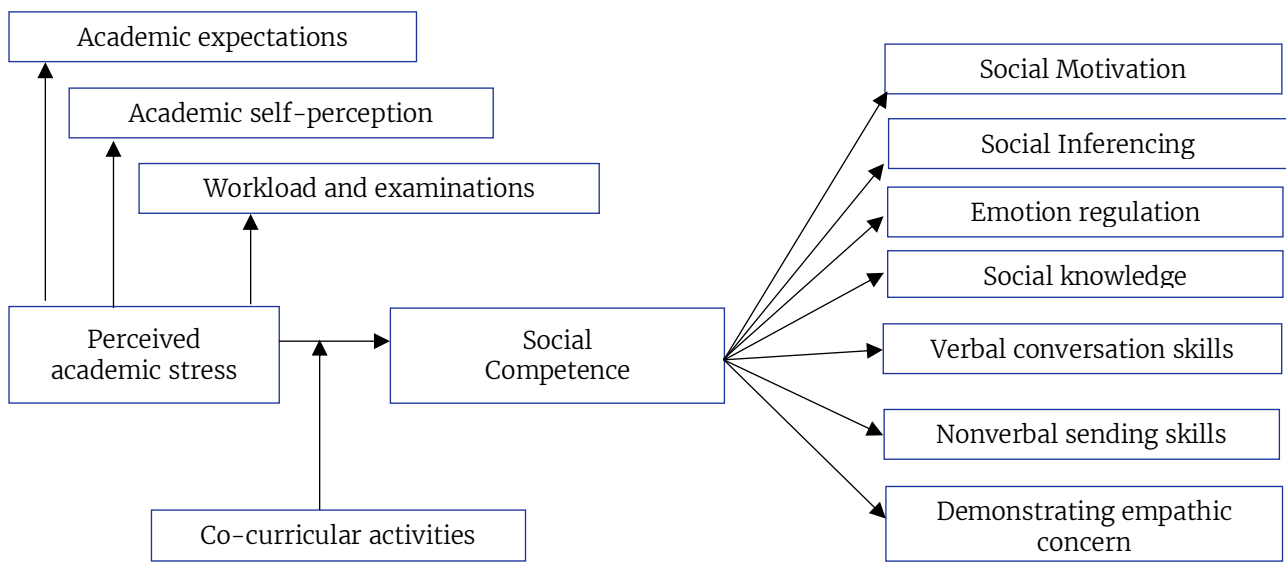
The current research focused on students' PAS, which is important to their well-being. The Stress-Coping Theory highlights individuals who become stressed and tend to cope with adaptive measures (Varo et al., 2023). In the context of university students, they deal with stress by being involved in social networking, participating in group projects, and joining societies. This leads to a rise in social competence. Moreover, the developmental potential of co-curricular engagement is underpinned by Self-Efficacy Theory which asserts that people cultivate confidence in their capabilities via experiential learning (El_haggar et al., 2019). Participation in co-curricular activities enables students to recognise their own effectiveness—through successful collaboration, project leadership, or public speaking—thereby fostering self-efficacy, which subsequently improves emotional control and social initiative. This impact is especially beneficial in high-pressure academic environments, where self-confidence helps alleviate the emotional strain of elevated expectations. Furthermore, Social Support Theory elucidates that co-curricular contexts provide emotionally enriching situations where students cultivate trust, empathy, and reciprocal support—essential components for alleviating academic stress and improving social competencies.

Significance of the Study

This research aims to investigate the link between perceived academic stress and social competence, while assessing the moderating effect of co-curricular activity on this relationship. It's a relationship that has received little empirical attention in the local context. Considering the rigorous academic expectations at Pakistani universities, where academic achievement often correlates with household honour and social advancement, it is particularly pertinent to examine how students navigate social dynamics under duress. Furthermore, as co-curricular activities gain acknowledgement as essential to comprehensive education, it is imperative to investigate their function not just as instruments for skill development but also as possible mitigators that influence students' reactions to academic problems.

The evidence indicates a complicated but significant association between academic stress and social competence, influenced by internal coping mechanisms and external contextual influences. Excessive stress may hinder emotional and social functioning, but when experienced at manageable levels in supportive circumstances, it may foster the development of essential interpersonal skills. Co-curricular activities provide settings that furnish pupils with the structure, feedback, and peer interaction essential for emotional and social growth. Nonetheless, their efficacy as modifiers of academic stress is contingent upon the form and intensity of involvement. This study is valuable for students' emotional and social growth, as it makes parents, educational professionals, and policy makers of Pakistan realise the importance of co-curricular activities at the university level. This research seeks to address a significant gap in the literature by examining the direct relationship between PAS and SC, while also analysing the intricate function of co-curricular activities within this framework, specifically in the educational and cultural setting of Pakistan.

Figure 1
Theoretical Framework of the Current Research



Research Objectives

- To investigate the relationship between PAS and SC among students.
- To investigate the moderating role of co-curricular activities in the relationship between PAS and SC.

Research Questions

- Is there a relationship between PAS and SC?
- Do co-curricular activities play a moderating role between PAS and SC?

Research Hypothesis

1. There will be a positive relationship between PAS and SC.
2. The Co-curricular activities will play a moderating role between PAS and SC.

Methodology

Research Design

This study was quantitative in nature and based on a correlational experimental design. This research targeted university students residing in Karachi. Two scales were used to measure PAS and SC, respectively. Co-curricular activities were tapped through a demographic form. PAS was measured through the Perception of Academic Stress Scale, and SC was evaluated through the Multidimensional Social Competence Scale.

Sampling Size & Sampling Procedure

The research was conducted in Karachi, Pakistan. The sampling technique used to recruit the appropriate population was through purposive, convenience, and snowball sampling techniques. This included university students who are between 18 and 30 years of age. The reason for choosing this age bracket was that individuals in Pakistan commonly start their graduation at the age of 18 and complete their graduation/post-graduation by the age of 30.

Inclusion Criteria

- Students enrolled in an accredited university, either at the undergraduate or graduate level.
- Individuals between the ages of 18 and 30.
- Students who have participated in extracurricular activities for at least one semester, including sports, clubs, volunteer work, and cultural events.

Exclusion Criteria

- Students are not actively enrolled in any academic institution.
- Students with significant disabilities.
- Students who have not participated in any extracurricular activities.

Measures

Demographic form

The demographic form of this research requested participants to provide certain personal information, such as age, marital status, educational attainment, and family structure. Most importantly, the demographic form evaluated whether the participants are involved in any kind of co-curricular activity, the kind of such activities, and for how long they have been engaged in such activities.

The Perception of Academic Stress Scale

The Perception of Academic Stress (PAS) Scale, developed by Bedewy and Gabriel (2015), is a psychometric tool designed to assess students' perceptions of academic stress across many dimensions of their educational experience. It's an 18-item, 5-point Likert scale (ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree") that assesses traits such as time management, academic workload, peer competition, exam-related stress, parental expectations, and self-confidence in academic and career achievement. The scale has a Cronbach's alpha value of 0.81, indicating strong internal consistency (Irfan & Sami, 2020).

Multidimensional Social Competence Scale

The Multidimensional Social Competence Scale (MSCS), an elaborate self-assessment instrument for assessing diverse social skills, was developed by Jodi Yager and Grace Iarocci. The 77-item survey solicits participants' thoughts and behaviours over the last six months using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "Not True or Almost Never True" to "Very True or Almost Always True." The scale has a robust reliability value of 0.89, as shown by Lavall and Aldeguer (2016).

Procedure

The researchers began to find the appropriate scales to measure the respective variables. Then, they emailed the authors of the scale to ask for their permission to use it. The participants were recruited through purposive, convenience, and snowball sampling techniques. They were all from different universities and were based on the inclusion and exclusion criteria mentioned above.

Data was gathered through a structured, paper-based questionnaire that included both closed-ended and Likert-scale items. Two scales were used: Perception of Academic Stress Bedewy and Gabriel (2015) and Multidimensional Social Competence Scale (Jodi Yager and Grace Iarocci). At the same time, co-curricular activities were tapped through a demographic questionnaire. Defined participants were approached in person, and surveys were completed by them.

They were informed of the study's objectives, procedures, and ethical considerations. They were assured that their participation was voluntary, that they could withdraw at any time without penalty, and that all responses would remain confidential and anonymous. Written informed consent was obtained before the survey was carried out. Each participant was advised that the questionnaire would take approximately 20 minutes to complete. After data collection, the data were organised, evaluated and analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics to find out the results.

Results and Discussion

Table 1

Frequency and Percentages of Demographic Variable (N=300)

Variables	f	%	M	SD
Gender			1.543	0.4990
Male	137	45.7%		
Female	163	54.3%		
CCRA1			3.220	1.2124
Sports Club	36	12.0%		
Drama/Theatre Club	37	12.3%		
Debating Club	101	33.7%		
Media Club	77	25.7%		
Music Club	49	16.3%		
CCRA2			2.157	0.8453
Monthly	87	29.0%		
Occasionally	79	26.3%		
Rarely	134	44.7%		
CCRA3			1.917	1.0987
Less than 1 hour	138	46.0%		
1 - 3 Hours	93	31.0%		
4 - 6 Hours	37	12.3%		
7 - 10 Hours	20	6.7%		
More than 10 Hours	12	4.0%		
CCRA4			3.147	1.1789
Not engaged at all	34	11.3%		
Slightly Engaged	49	16.3%		
Moderately Engaged	94	31.3%		
Highly Engaged	85	28.3%		
Fully Engaged	38	12.7%		
CCRA5			3.220	1.1617
Personal Interest	29	9.7%		
Skill Development	47	15.7%		
Networking	95	31.7%		
Stress Relief	87	29.0%		
Academic/Career Advancement	42	14.0%		

Note: f= frequency, %= percentage, M= Mean, SD= Standard Deviation, CCRA= Co-curricular Activities

Table 1 provides a detailed analysis of the demographic and extracurricular characteristics of the study's participants, indicating that the sample is well-balanced and representative.

Table 2*Correlations between Perceived Academic Stress and Social Competence*

	SC	SM	SI	EC	SK	VC	NVC	ER
PAS	.235**	-.071	-.054	-.495**	-.074	-.316**	.169**	.304**
AE	.270**	.008	.084	.517**	-.110	-.382**	.177**	.290**
WLE	.185**	-.143**	.066	.428**	-.068	-.277**	.151**	.290**
ASP	.093	.024	-.126**	.160**	.021	-.022	.032	.094

Note: PAS= Perceived Academic Stress, SC= Social Competence, AE= Academic Expectations, ASP= Academic Self-Perception, WLE= Workload and Examinations, SM= Self-Motivation, SI= Self-Interference, ER= Emotional Regulation, VC= Verbal Conversation, EC= Empathetic Concern, NVC= Non-Verbal Sending Skills, SK= Social Knowledge

Table 2 above shows a positive relationship ($r = 0.5$, $p < 0.01$) between PAS and SC. The table clearly shows a moderate positive relationship of AE with EC ($r = .517$, $p < .01$) whereas WLE was moderately positively correlated with EC ($r = .428$, $p < .01$) and with ER ($r = .290$, $p < .01$). PAS demonstrated a moderate positive relationship with ER ($r = .304$, $p < .01$), and smaller positive correlations between SC, and VC.

Table 3*The Moderating Role of Co-curricular Activities in the Relationship between PAS and SC*

Effect	Coefficient	SE	95% CI		p
			LL	UL	
Constant	3.257	0.0091	3.2389	3.2746	<0.0001
PAS	.185	0.0130	0.1592	0.2105	<0.0001
CCA	-0.004	0.0120	-0.0276	0.0197	0.741
PAS*CCA	0.0053	0.0173	-0.0287	0.0393	0.759

Note: SE= Standardized error, SC= Social Competence, CCA= Co-Curricular Activities, LL= Lower Limit, UL= Upper Limit, $P < .000$

Table 3 above clearly shows that the co-curricular activities have no significant moderating role between PAS and SC.

Table 4*The Moderating Role of Co-Curricular Activities in the Relationship between PAS and the Sub-scale of SC*

Effect	Coefficient	SE	95% CI		p
			LL	UL	
Constant	3.059	0.022	3.015	3.102	<0.001
PAS	.302	0.032	0.239	0.364	<0.001
CCA	.053	0.034	-0.015	0.120	0.125
PAS*CCA	-0.0554	0.050	-0.154	0.043	0.269

Note: SE= Standard Error, VC= Verbal Comprehension, CCA= Co-Curricular Activities, LL= Lower Limit, UL= Upper Limit, $P < .001$

Table 4 above indicates the main effect of PAS on VC is significant and positive, as Cp-efficient shows 0.302 along with a p-value of <0.001. Whereas the moderating effect of co-curricular activities is not statistically significant, this suggests that if PAS and VS slope changes slightly, it's due to the involvement of co-curricular activities.

Discussion

Pakistan is one of those populated countries which is struggling to provide good education. According to the recent survey of 2025, the estimated literacy rate of Pakistan is 58.75% of around 1 billion people (Mohyuddin, 2025). Though this highlights the lack of literate people in the country, it's improved if

compared with last year's survey. This contributed to the mindset of the people of Pakistan in general. They encourage their children to invest their energies and time in studying rather than focusing on other activities. In some cases, they further pressurise the students to achieve high grades and if they can't achieve so, this results in hopelessness and being called unintelligent. Such students only focus on studies and consider social gatherings as a waste of time and energy.

As hypothesised, this study recognised a significant and positive correlation between Perceived Academic Stress (PAS) and Social Competence (SC). It suggested those students who have elevated academic stress had greater SC. This is in line with the literature, as this frames mild stress as a catalyst for adaptive coping mechanisms (Folkman, 1985). This further aligns with one of the previous research studies that students adopt adaptive coping strategies like engaging in social skills to deal with academic stress. Parents do motivate their children to study and achieve good grades but when they see their children are burdened with their high academic expectations, they try to improve their social environments. Moreover, students are involved in group studies, peer conversations, and social reinforcement.

In addition, this study assessed no moderation of co-curricular activities between PAS and SC. Although it's believed co-curricular activities enhance social competence and buffers the impact of academic stress, no significance is found in the current research. However, the previous research clearly states how helpful co-curricular activities are based on how well they are planned, how often they happen within the university, and what sort of interactions they involve. If such activities are badly organized, monotonous, and done without little or no interest so this will not help students much. In Pakistan, co-curricular activities are often seen as less important and considered as a waste of time. This leads to diminished levels of persistent, deliberate engagement which compromises their efficacy as stress mitigators.

Nonetheless, the research revealed that co-curricular activities had a beneficial impact on some aspects of social competence, especially verbal communication skills, in the context of academic stress. This conclusion is corroborated by Bylkova et al. (2021), which concluded that organized, speech-oriented activities such as debates, theater, and public speaking workshops—substantially enhance students' confidence and articulation, particularly with regular practice. Such activities help students to handle stress and communicate well like a real-life rehearsal. While it does not help students build good social skills, it does contribute build specific and important interpersonal skills.

Implications

The outcomes of this research have various implications for the higher education commission of Pakistan. Academic stress is not always harmful, but it can help in building social skills. Students likely cope with stress by discussing their experiences with their peers, involve in group studies, and social networking. This further encourages universities to establish support systems that will help students manage their emotions, and work with their peers. In Pakistan, where family and teachers demand good grades, it's important to also support students' emotional and social growth. In addition, universities should not only introduce co-curricular activities for the sake of participating in it but to plan these activities carefully, so they are interesting, meaningful, and connected to practical skills.

Conclusion

The study focused on university students who have participated in any co-curricular activities at least one semester. The results of the study clearly accepted one of the hypotheses; there is significant positive correlation between PAS and SC. The other hypothesis is rejected that is no moderating role of co-curricular activities between PAS and SC. Few recommendations were suggested in order to incorporate the findings into practice. Finding a little bit of academic stress can help students to improve their social skills. Stress is not considered harmful but helpful. It showed people that it can benefit them to grow socially. This study gives us insight into new ways of co-curricular activities within universities. Not just is taking part in such activities, but activities which develop specific skills like speaking abilities can help build students' social skills. It's essential to take such measures as it will benefit the countries like Pakistan.

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