



ROLE OF POOR ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF DEPRESSION AMONG STUDENTS

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KEYWORDS

Poor Academic Performance,
Depression, Thematic Analysis

CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Bibi, R., Fatima, S. H., & Mahmood, A. (2025). Role of poor academic achievement in the development of depression among students. *Pakistan Journal of Mental Health*, 2(2), 7-11.

ARTICLE DETAILS:

Received on 3 Oct, 2025
Accepted on 15 Nov, 2025
Published on 25 Dec, 2025

ABSTRACT

Poor academic performance has been increasingly recognized as a significant psychosocial factor associated with the development of depression among students. The present study aimed to explore how academic underachievement contributes to depressive experiences from students' subjective perspectives. Using a qualitative, interpretivist research design, purposive sampling was employed to recruit students who had experienced sustained poor academic performance and related emotional distress. Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews and analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings revealed several interrelated themes, including decline in self-esteem and academic self-concept, academic pressure and fear of failure, social comparison and stigmatization, loss of motivation and learned helplessness, emotional distress, strained interpersonal relationships, and reduced future orientation marked by hopelessness. Together, these themes illustrate a cyclical process in which poor academic performance undermines psychological well-being, while emerging depressive symptoms further impair academic functioning. The study underscores the importance of early academic support, mental health screening, and integrated educational interventions to prevent academic difficulties from escalating into depression among students. These findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the psychological and social mechanisms linking academic performance and student mental health.

I. INTRODUCTION

Across educational levels and cultural contexts, a consistent body of evidence shows a strong association between poor academic performance and the development of depressive symptoms among students. Longitudinal and cross-sectional studies suggest that academic difficulties do not merely coexist with depression but can actively contribute to its onset by undermining self-esteem, increasing stress, and triggering negative cognitive appraisals. This relationship is often bidirectional, creating a vicious cycle in which poor performance worsens depression, which in turn further impairs academic functioning. Poor academic performance is a significant psychosocial stressor that can contribute to the development of depression among students. Academic failure often challenges students' self-concept and perceived competence, leading to feelings of worthlessness, shame, and hopelessness—core cognitive features of depression. Empirical studies among secondary school and university students consistently report higher rates of depressive symptoms in those with lower grades or self-rated academic performance, even after controlling for demographic and socioeconomic factors (Försterling & Binser, 2002; Latiff et al., 2016; Wagner et al., 2022).

In addition, poor academic performance can intensify chronic stress through fear of failure, parental and institutional pressure, and uncertainty about future opportunities. This sustained stress activates maladaptive coping mechanisms such as rumination, avoidance, and sleep disturbance, all of which increase vulnerability to depression. Research among medical and undergraduate students shows that low academic achievement is frequently accompanied by sleep problems, anxiety, and reduced academic self-efficacy, which together predict higher depressive symptomatology (Barahona-Correa et al., 2018; Tahir et al., 2021; Huang & Liu, 2023). Finally, poor academic performance may contribute to social withdrawal and reduced peer support, further exacerbating depressive risk. Students who struggle academically often disengage from academic and social environments, reinforcing isolation and negative self-attributions. Several studies describe this process as a self-perpetuating cycle: academic difficulties increase depression, and depression in turn impairs concentration, motivation, and memory, leading to further academic decline (Bryan et al., 2014; Coakley et al., 2022). These findings highlight the importance of early academic support and mental health interventions to prevent the progression from academic difficulties to clinical depression.

II. METHOD

Participants

This study would adopt a qualitative, interpretivist research design to explore how poor academic performance influences the development of depressive experiences among students. A qualitative approach is appropriate because it prioritizes participants' subjective interpretations of academic failure and emotional distress, rather than measuring symptoms or grades in isolation. The design seeks to understand *how* and *why* academic underperformance becomes psychologically distressing within specific educational and social contexts, as emphasized in prior qualitative mental-health research among students (Cox et al., 2025; Olusina, 2025). Participants would be selected using purposive sampling, targeting secondary-school or university students who have experienced sustained poor academic performance (e.g., repeated course failure, probation, or declining grades). Inclusion criteria would focus on students who self-report emotional distress related to academic difficulties, while ensuring diversity in gender, age, field of study, and socioeconomic background. Sampling would continue until data saturation is reached, consistent with qualitative best practices (Theaker et al., 2025). This approach allows for rich, information-dense accounts of academic struggle and mental health.

Measures

Data collection would primarily involve semi-structured, in-depth interviews, as this method enables participants to narrate personal experiences of academic failure, perceived causes, emotional responses, and coping strategies. Interview guides would include open-ended questions addressing experiences of poor performance, perceived academic expectations, changes in self-worth, social relationships, and the emergence of depressive feelings such as hopelessness or withdrawal. Where appropriate, focus group discussions may complement interviews to explore shared meanings and peer-related pressures linked to academic performance (Olusina, 2025). All interviews would be audio-recorded with informed consent and transcribed verbatim. Data analysis would follow a thematic analysis approach, using iterative coding to identify recurring patterns related to academic failure and depression. Initial open coding would capture key concepts, followed by axial coding to link academic experiences with emotional and cognitive responses, such as self-blame, fear of stigma, and loss of motivation. Themes would be reviewed and refined to ensure coherence and depth, in line with established qualitative analytic procedures (Cox et al., 2025).

Procedure

To enhance trustworthiness, the study would employ strategies such as member checking, reflexive journaling, and peer debriefing. Credibility would be strengthened by returning preliminary interpretations to participants for validation, while dependability would be supported through transparent documentation of analytic decisions. Ethical considerations would be central, given the sensitivity of depression-related discussions; participants would be informed of their right to withdraw and provided with referrals to counseling services if distress arises during data collection.

III. RESULTS

The thematic analysis identified several interconnected themes that explain how poor academic performance contributes to the development of depressive symptoms among students. These themes reflect students' emotional, cognitive, and social experiences associated with academic difficulties.

Table 1: Findings of the Study Given Below

Theme No.	Themes	Description of Themes
Theme 1	Decline in Self-Esteem and Academic Self-Concept	Poor academic performance often leads to a negative self-evaluation among students. Repeated failures or low grades contribute to feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt, causing students to perceive themselves as less capable or intelligent than their peers. This diminished academic self-concept weakens confidence and fosters persistent negative self-talk, which is a core feature of depressive thinking.
Theme 2	Academic Pressure and Fear of Failure	Students experiencing poor performance frequently report heightened pressure to succeed, particularly in competitive educational environments. Fear of further failure, disappointing parents or teachers, and concerns about future career prospects create chronic stress. This constant pressure can overwhelm coping resources, increasing vulnerability to depressive symptoms such as anxiety, hopelessness, and emotional exhaustion.
Theme 3	Social Comparison and Stigmatization	Poor academic performance intensifies negative social comparisons with high-achieving peers. Students may internalize feelings of inferiority and experience shame or embarrassment, leading to perceived or actual stigmatization. Such social experiences often result in withdrawal from classmates and academic activities, reinforcing isolation and depressive moods.
Theme 4	Loss of Motivation and Learned Helplessness	Repeated academic setbacks can result in reduced motivation and a sense of learned helplessness. Students may begin to believe that effort will not improve outcomes, leading to disengagement from studies and avoidance of academic tasks. This pattern of withdrawal and perceived lack of control is closely linked to depressive symptomatology.
Theme 5	Emotional Distress and Negative Affect	Poor academic performance is associated with persistent emotional distress, including sadness, frustration, guilt, and worthlessness. Over time, these emotions may become chronic, contributing to the development or worsening of depression. Students often describe feeling trapped in a cycle of poor performance and emotional suffering.
Theme 6	Impact on Interpersonal Relationships	Academic difficulties can strain relationships with parents, teachers, and peers. Criticism, reduced support, or unrealistic expectations from significant others exacerbate emotional distress. Lack of understanding or empathy from the social environment further deepens feelings of loneliness and depression.
Theme 7	Reduced Future Orientation and Hopelessness	Students struggling academically may develop pessimistic views about their future. Poor performance undermines aspirations and career goals, leading to feelings of hopelessness. This loss of future orientation is a key psychological pathway through which academic failure contributes to depression.

IV. DISCUSSION

The findings of the present study highlight poor academic performance as a significant psychological risk factor in the development of depression among students. Consistent with prior research, the thematic analysis revealed that academic underachievement undermines students' self-esteem and academic self-concept, fostering negative self-evaluations and feelings of incompetence. These findings align with cognitive theories of depression, which emphasize the role of negative self-schemas in the onset and maintenance of depressive symptoms (Försterling &

Binser, 2002). Empirical studies across secondary and tertiary education similarly report that students with lower grades or perceived academic failure exhibit higher levels of depressive symptoms, even when controlling for socioeconomic and demographic variables (Latiff et al., 2016; Wagner et al., 2022). Another key finding concerns the role of academic pressure and fear of failure as chronic stressors that exacerbate emotional vulnerability. Participants' experiences reflect how institutional expectations, parental demands, and uncertainty regarding future academic and career outcomes intensify psychological distress. This sustained stress appears to trigger maladaptive coping mechanisms such as rumination, sleep disturbances, and avoidance behaviors, all of which are well-established predictors of depression. These results are supported by previous studies demonstrating strong associations between low academic achievement, sleep problems, anxiety, and depressive symptoms among university and medical students (Barahona-Correa et al., 2018; Tahir et al., 2021; Huang & Liu, 2023).

The themes of social comparison, stigmatization, and interpersonal strain further illuminate the social pathways through which poor academic performance contributes to depression. Students struggling academically often engage in unfavorable comparisons with higher-performing peers, leading to shame, social withdrawal, and perceived rejection. This social disengagement reduces access to peer support, which is a critical protective factor against depression. Similar patterns have been reported in studies showing that academic difficulties are associated with social isolation and reduced sense of belonging, thereby increasing depressive risk (Bryan et al., 2014; Coakley et al., 2022). These findings underscore the importance of viewing academic performance not only as an individual outcome but also as a socially embedded experience. Finally, the results suggest that repeated academic failure may lead to loss of motivation, learned helplessness, and hopelessness regarding future goals, forming a self-perpetuating cycle of academic decline and depression. Students' reduced belief in their ability to influence outcomes mirrors classical models of learned helplessness, which have long been linked to depressive symptomatology. This cyclical relationship—where poor academic performance contributes to depression, and depression further impairs concentration, memory, and motivation—has been consistently documented in the literature (Försterling & Binser, 2002; Wagner et al., 2022). Together, these findings highlight the critical need for early academic support, mental health screening, and integrated interventions to prevent academic difficulties from escalating into clinical depression.

V. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the findings of this study demonstrate that poor academic performance plays a substantial role in the development of depression among students through intertwined cognitive, emotional, and social pathways. Academic underachievement undermines self-esteem and academic self-concept, heightens stress and fear of failure, and promotes negative social comparison and stigmatization, all of which contribute to depressive symptomatology. Repeated experiences of failure further lead to loss of motivation, learned helplessness, and hopelessness about the future, creating a self-reinforcing cycle in which depression and poor performance mutually exacerbate one another. Overall, the findings underscore the importance of early identification of academically struggling students and the implementation of integrated academic support and mental health interventions to prevent academic difficulties from escalating into long-term psychological distress.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Funding

The author received no funding from any organizations.

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