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Psychological Hardiness as a Moderator between Academic Stress and Emotional Well-Being among Higher Secondary Students

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Keywords

*Academic Stress;
Psychological
Hardiness; Emotional
Well-Being;
Moderation; Higher
Secondary Students.*

Abstract

Academic stress has become a pervasive concern among higher secondary students due to increasing academic demands, competitive examination systems, and performance-oriented evaluation practices. Prolonged academic stress during late adolescence has been shown to adversely affect students' emotional well-being, motivation, and psychological adjustment. However, individual differences in psychological resilience may influence how students respond to academic pressure. The present study examines the moderating role of psychological hardiness in the relationship between academic stress and emotional well-being among higher secondary students. A quantitative research approach employing a correlational survey design was adopted. Data were collected from 300 Class XI students studying in U.P. Board schools in Prayagraj city. After screening the data for completeness and consistency, 291 valid responses were retained for final analysis. Standardised psychological instruments were administered to measure academic stress, psychological hardiness, and emotional well-being.



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	The data were analysed using descriptive statistics, Pearson's product-moment correlation, and regression-based moderation analysis. The findings revealed a significant negative relationship between academic stress and emotional well-being, indicating that higher levels of academic stress are associated with poorer emotional well-being among students. Psychological hardiness was found to be positively related to emotional well-being and negatively related to academic stress.
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1. Introduction

1.1 Academic Stress in Higher Secondary Education

Academic stress has become a pervasive phenomenon among higher secondary students due to increasing academic demands, examination-oriented curricula, competitive entrance tests, and heightened expectations from parents and society. At the higher secondary stage, students experience a critical academic transition where performance is closely linked to future educational and career opportunities. This intensifies pressure and often results in stress that exceeds students' perceived coping capacities (Sharma & Kaur, 2022; Upadhyay & Singh, 2024).

Academic stress refers to the psychological strain arising from academic demands such as examinations, workload, time pressure, and fear of failure. Empirical studies have shown that sustained academic stress adversely affects students' emotional functioning, academic engagement, motivation, and overall psychological adjustment (Kumar & Bhargava, 2022; Putwain & Daly, 2023). Adolescents exposed to prolonged academic stress are more vulnerable to anxiety, emotional exhaustion, irritability, and reduced emotional well-being, making academic stress a serious educational and mental health concern.

1.2 Emotional Well-Being in Adolescence

Emotional well-being is a vital component of mental health and refers to an individual's ability to experience positive emotions, maintain emotional balance, and cope effectively with daily stressors. During adolescence, emotional well-being plays a crucial role in academic adjustment, interpersonal relationships, and overall psychological development. Research has consistently demonstrated that academic stress is negatively associated with emotional well-being among students, leading to emotional instability, decreased life satisfaction, and psychological distress (Suldo et al., 2021; Rahman et al., 2024).

Recent studies highlight that higher secondary students experiencing elevated academic stress often report lower levels of happiness, increased emotional fatigue, and difficulty regulating emotions (Singh & Kumar, 2023). Given the developmental sensitivity of adolescence, protecting emotional well-being during this stage is essential for healthy academic and personal growth.



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1.3 Psychological Hardiness as a Resilience-Based Construct

Psychological hardiness is a personality-oriented resilience construct that enables individuals to withstand stress and maintain psychological health. It comprises three interrelated dimensions: commitment, control, and challenge. Commitment reflects sustained engagement in activities, control denotes belief in one's ability to influence outcomes, and challenge refers to perceiving stressors as opportunities for growth rather than threats (Singh, 2008; Sharma & Kaur, 2022).

Contemporary research has emphasised psychological hardiness as a critical internal resource that enhances stress resistance and emotional regulation. Individuals high in psychological hardiness demonstrate better coping strategies, emotional stability, and resilience in stressful situations (Windle, 2021; Richardson et al., 2023). Although psychological hardiness has been extensively studied in occupational and health psychology, its application in educational contexts—particularly among higher secondary students—remains limited.

2. Review of Related Literature

2.1 Academic Stress and Emotional Well-Being

A growing body of literature indicates a strong negative relationship between academic stress and emotional well-being. Studies conducted across different educational contexts have reported that excessive academic stress significantly reduces students' emotional balance, increases anxiety, and impairs psychological functioning (Deb et al., 2020; Kumar & Bhargava, 2022). Putwain and Daly (2023) observed that students facing high academic stress during examination periods exhibited lower emotional well-being and higher emotional exhaustion.

In the Indian context, Upadhyay and Singh (2024) found that higher secondary students experiencing intense academic stress reported diminished emotional satisfaction and increased emotional instability. These findings underscore the need to identify psychological factors that can protect students' emotional well-being in academically demanding environments.

2.2 Psychological Hardiness and Academic Stress

Psychological hardiness has been identified as a significant protective factor against stress. Research suggests that individuals with high levels of hardiness perceive stressors as manageable and are less likely to experience overwhelming stress reactions (Sharma & Kaur, 2022; Richardson et al., 2023). In educational settings, psychologically hardy students demonstrate greater perseverance, adaptive coping, and emotional regulation when faced with academic challenges. Recent studies indicate that psychological hardiness is negatively associated with academic stress among adolescents. Students with higher hardiness scores report lower stress levels and greater confidence in managing academic demands (Singh & Singh, 2025). These findings suggest that psychological hardiness reduces students' vulnerability to academic stress by altering stress appraisal and coping responses.

2.3 Psychological Hardiness and Emotional Well-Being

Empirical evidence consistently demonstrates a positive relationship between psychological hardiness and emotional well-being. Students with higher levels of hardiness tend to exhibit optimism, emotional stability, and psychological resilience (Windle, 2021; Rahman et al., 2024).



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Psychological hardiness facilitates adaptive emotional responses by encouraging a sense of control and engagement, which enhances emotional well-being even under stressful conditions.

In a recent study, Singh and Kumar (2023) reported that psychologically hardy adolescents showed significantly higher emotional well-being and lower emotional distress compared to their less hardy counterparts. These findings highlight psychological hardiness as an important contributor to emotional health in academic settings.

2.4 Psychological Hardiness as a Moderator between Academic Stress and Emotional Well-Being

Recent literature has increasingly advocated for moderation-based models to understand individual differences in stress responses. Moderation implies that the strength or direction of the relationship between academic stress and emotional well-being varies depending on levels of psychological hardiness (Zysberg & Dolev, 2023). Students with high psychological hardiness are expected to maintain emotional well-being even under high academic stress, whereas those with low hardiness are more susceptible to emotional deterioration.

However, empirical studies examining psychological hardiness as a moderator between academic stress and emotional well-being among higher secondary students are scarce, particularly in the Indian educational context. Most existing research has focused on direct relationships or adult populations, leaving a critical gap in adolescent-focused moderation research (Mohamed et al., 2025). Addressing this gap is essential for developing resilience-oriented educational interventions.

2.5 Gap

Although prior studies have examined academic stress, emotional well-being, and psychological hardiness independently, there is limited empirical research investigating psychological hardiness as a moderating variable between academic stress and emotional well-being among higher secondary students, particularly within the Indian educational context using recent resilience-based analytical models.

3. Objectives of the Study

The present study was undertaken with the following objectives:

1. To examine the relationship between academic stress and emotional well-being among higher secondary students.
2. To assess the relationship between psychological hardiness and emotional well-being among higher secondary students.
3. To analyse the moderating role of psychological hardiness in the relationship between academic stress and emotional well-being among higher secondary students.



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4. Research Hypotheses

To achieve the stated objectives, the following null and alternative hypotheses were formulated and tested:

Null Hypotheses (H₀)

- H₀₁: There is no significant relationship between academic stress and emotional well-being among higher secondary students.
- H₀₂: There is no significant relationship between psychological hardiness and emotional well-being among higher secondary students.
- H₀₃: Psychological hardiness does not significantly moderate the relationship between academic stress and emotional well-being among higher secondary students.

Alternative Hypotheses (H₁)

- H₁₁: There is a significant relationship between academic stress and emotional well-being among higher secondary students.
- H₁₂: There is a significant relationship between psychological hardiness and emotional well-being among higher secondary students.
- H₁₃: Psychological hardiness significantly moderates the relationship between academic stress and emotional well-being among higher secondary students.

5. Research Methodology

5.1 Research Design

The present study adopted a quantitative research approach using a correlational survey design. This design was considered appropriate as the study aimed to examine naturally occurring relationships among academic stress, psychological hardiness, and emotional well-being, and to test the moderating effect of psychological hardiness without manipulating any variables. The design allowed for statistical examination of interaction effects through moderation analysis.

5.2 Population and Sample

The population of the study comprised higher secondary students studying in Class XI in schools affiliated with the U.P. Board in Prayagraj city. An initial sample of 300 students was selected using appropriate sampling techniques. After data screening for completeness, accuracy, and response consistency, 291 questionnaires were found to be valid and were retained for final statistical analysis. The final sample included both male and female students from different academic streams, ensuring adequate representation and variability.



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5.3 Sampling Technique

Random sampling was used for the selection of schools, followed by stratified random sampling for the selection of students to ensure proportionate representation of gender. This approach enhanced the representativeness and external validity of the study.

5.4 Variables of the Study

- **Independent Variable:** Academic Stress
- **Moderating Variable:** Psychological Hardiness
- **Dependent Variable:** Emotional Well-Being

5.5 Tools Used for Data Collection

The following standardised psychological instruments were used:

1. Academic Stress Scale, developed by the investigator, measuring stress related to examinations, workload, time pressure, and performance expectations. The scale was standardised through pilot testing and expert validation.
2. Psychological Hardiness Scale developed by Arun Kumar Singh (2008), measuring commitment, control, and challenge.
3. Emotional Well-Being Scale, a standardised instrument assessing positive affect, emotional balance, and psychological wellness among adolescents.

All tools demonstrated satisfactory reliability and validity for use with higher secondary students.

5.6 Procedure of Data Collection

Prior permission was obtained from school authorities before data collection. The students were informed about the purpose of the study and assured of confidentiality and anonymity. Participation was voluntary, and the questionnaires were administered during school hours under the supervision of the researcher. Ethical research guidelines were strictly followed throughout the data collection process.

5.7 Statistical Techniques Used

The collected data were analysed using the following statistical methods:

- Descriptive statistics (Mean and Standard Deviation)
- Pearson's Product Moment Correlation
- Regression-based Moderation Analysis (interaction effect)



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All statistical tests were conducted at a 0.05 level of significance.

5.8 Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to ethical standards of research by ensuring informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality of responses, and the use of data strictly for academic purposes.

6. Data Analysis and Results

The data collected for the present study were analysed using appropriate statistical techniques to examine the relationships among academic stress, psychological hardiness, and emotional well-being, and to test the moderating role of psychological hardiness. Prior to analysis, the data were screened for completeness, accuracy, and outliers. Of the 300 questionnaires administered, **291 responses were found to be complete and valid** and were retained for final analysis. All statistical analyses were performed using standard statistical software at a **0.05 level of significance**.

6.1 Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics were computed to understand the overall distribution and variability of academic stress, psychological hardiness, and emotional well-being among higher secondary students.

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics of the Study Variables (N = 291)

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation
Academic Stress	124.18	18.21
Psychological Hardiness	94.86	14.72
Emotional Well-Being	72.44	11.63

The mean score of academic stress indicates a **moderately high level of stress** among higher secondary students. The mean scores of psychological hardiness and emotional well-being suggest **moderate levels of resilience and emotional health**, with sufficient variability to justify further inferential analysis.

6.2 Correlation Analysis

Pearson's Product Moment Correlation was employed to examine the relationships among academic stress, psychological hardiness, and emotional well-being.

Table 2
Correlation Matrix among the Study Variables

Variables	1	2
1. Academic Stress	1	



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2. Psychological Hardiness	-0.43**	1
3. Emotional Well-Being	-0.49**	0.46**

Note: $p < 0.01$

The results reveal a **significant negative relationship** between academic stress and emotional well-being ($r = -0.49$, $p < 0.01$), indicating that increased academic stress is associated with poorer emotional well-being. Academic stress is also negatively correlated with psychological hardiness ($r = -0.43$, $p < 0.01$), suggesting that students with higher resilience experience lower stress levels. Psychological hardiness shows a significant positive correlation with emotional well-being ($r = 0.46$, $p < 0.01$).

6.3 Regression Analysis

To examine the predictive effect of academic stress on emotional well-being, simple linear regression analysis was conducted.

Table 3

Regression Analysis Predicting Emotional Well-Being from Academic Stress

Predictor	β	t-value	p-value
Academic Stress	-0.49	-9.64	.000

The regression results indicate that academic stress significantly predicts emotional well-being ($\beta = -0.49$, $p < 0.001$). Higher academic stress leads to a significant reduction in emotional well-being among higher secondary students. Thus, the null hypothesis stating that academic stress does not significantly influence emotional well-being is rejected.

6.4 Moderation Analysis

To test the moderating role of psychological hardiness in the relationship between academic stress and emotional well-being, regression-based moderation analysis was performed by introducing an interaction term between academic stress and psychological hardiness.

Step 1: Academic stress significantly predicted emotional well-being ($\beta = -0.49$, $p < 0.001$).

Step 2: Psychological hardiness significantly predicted emotional well-being ($\beta = 0.38$, $p < 0.001$).

Step 3: The interaction term (Academic Stress \times Psychological Hardiness) was entered into the regression model.

Table 4

Moderation Regression Analysis

Predictor	β	t-value	p-value
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Academic Stress	-0.34	-6.78	.000
Psychological Hardiness	0.29	5.86	.000
Academic Stress × Psychological Hardiness	0.21	4.32	.001

The interaction effect was found to be statistically significant ($\beta = 0.21$, $p < 0.01$), confirming that psychological hardiness significantly moderates the relationship between academic stress and emotional well-being. The positive interaction coefficient indicates that psychological hardiness buffers the negative impact of academic stress on emotional well-being.

6.5 Interpretation of Moderation Effect

The moderation analysis reveals that students with high psychological hardiness maintain relatively better emotional well-being even under conditions of high academic stress, whereas students with low psychological hardiness experience a sharper decline in emotional well-being as academic stress increases. This finding highlights psychological hardiness as a crucial protective factor that mitigates the adverse emotional consequences of academic stress.

6.6 Testing of Hypotheses (Summary)

- **H₀₁** (No relationship between academic stress and emotional well-being) is **rejected**.
- **H₀₂** (No relationship between psychological hardiness and emotional well-being) is **rejected**.
- **H₀₃** (Psychological hardiness does not moderate the relationship) is **rejected**.

Results

The results demonstrate that academic stress significantly undermines emotional well-being among higher secondary students. Psychological hardiness not only enhances emotional well-being directly but also serves as a significant moderator that buffers the negative effects of academic stress. These findings confirm the protective role of psychological hardiness in emotionally demanding academic environments.

7. Testing of Hypotheses

The hypotheses formulated for the present study were tested using Pearson's Product-Moment Correlation and regression-based moderation analysis. All statistical tests were conducted at a **0.05 level of significance**.

Testing of Hypothesis H₀₁



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Null Hypothesis (H₀₁): There is no significant relationship between academic stress and emotional well-being among higher secondary students.

Correlation analysis revealed a significant negative relationship between academic stress and emotional well-being ($r = -0.49$, $p < 0.01$). The regression analysis further confirmed that academic stress significantly predicts emotional well-being ($\beta = -0.49$, $p < 0.001$). As the obtained p-value was lower than the significance level, the null hypothesis H₀₁ was **rejected**. This indicates that higher academic stress leads to poorer emotional well-being among higher secondary students.

Testing of Hypothesis H₀₂

Null Hypothesis (H₀₂): There is no significant relationship between psychological hardiness and emotional well-being among higher secondary students.

The results showed a significant positive correlation between psychological hardiness and emotional well-being ($r = 0.46$, $p < 0.01$). Regression analysis also demonstrated that psychological hardiness significantly predicts emotional well-being ($\beta = 0.38$, $p < 0.001$). Therefore, the null hypothesis H₀₂ was **rejected**, indicating that students with higher psychological hardiness experience better emotional well-being.

Testing of Hypothesis H₀₃

Null Hypothesis (H₀₃): Psychological hardiness does not significantly moderate the relationship between academic stress and emotional well-being among higher secondary students.

Moderation analysis revealed that the interaction term between academic stress and psychological hardiness was statistically significant ($\beta = 0.21$, $p < 0.01$). This confirms that psychological hardiness significantly alters the strength of the relationship between academic stress and emotional well-being. As a result, the null hypothesis H₀₃ was **rejected**, establishing psychological hardiness as a significant moderating variable.

Summary of Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis	Result
H ₀₁	Rejected
H ₀₂	Rejected
H ₀₃	Rejected

8. Discussion

The present study investigated the relationship between academic stress and emotional well-being and examined the moderating role of psychological hardiness among higher secondary students. The findings provide strong empirical support for the proposed moderation model and enhance



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understanding of how resilience-based psychological traits influence adolescents' emotional responses to academic pressure.

The results indicated that academic stress has a significant negative impact on emotional well-being. Students experiencing high academic stress reported lower levels of emotional balance, positive affect, and psychological comfort. This finding is consistent with contemporary research suggesting that excessive academic demands during late adolescence contribute to emotional exhaustion, anxiety, and reduced psychological well-being. The high-stakes nature of higher secondary education, characterised by examination pressure and performance expectations, likely intensifies emotional strain among students.

Psychological hardiness emerged as a significant positive predictor of emotional well-being. Students with higher levels of hardiness demonstrated greater emotional stability, optimism, and psychological resilience. The three components of hardiness—commitment, control, and challenge—enable students to remain engaged in academic activities, perceive academic demands as manageable, and interpret stressors as opportunities for growth rather than threats. This adaptive appraisal reduces emotional vulnerability and enhances well-being.

Most importantly, the moderation analysis confirmed that psychological hardiness buffers the negative impact of academic stress on emotional well-being. Students with high hardiness maintained relatively stable emotional well-being even under high levels of academic stress, whereas those with low hardiness exhibited a sharper decline in emotional well-being as stress increased. This finding underscores the protective function of psychological hardiness in emotionally demanding academic contexts and supports resilience-based models of stress and coping.

9. Educational Implications

The findings of the study have important implications for educational practice, student support systems, and policy formulation at the higher secondary level. Given the detrimental impact of academic stress on emotional well-being, schools must prioritise psychological resilience alongside academic achievement.

Educational institutions should incorporate resilience-building and hardiness-enhancement programmes into the curriculum. Life-skills education, stress management workshops, and resilience training can help students develop a sense of control, commitment, and positive challenge orientation. Teachers can contribute by creating supportive classroom environments that encourage persistence, autonomy, and adaptive coping rather than excessive performance pressure.

School counsellors and psychologists should focus on identifying students with low psychological hardiness and providing targeted interventions to strengthen their coping capacities. Counselling programmes that promote cognitive reframing, emotional regulation, and problem-solving skills can significantly enhance students' emotional well-being. Additionally, reducing excessive academic pressure through balanced evaluation systems and supportive feedback mechanisms can further mitigate stress-related emotional difficulties.



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10. Conclusion

The present study concludes that academic stress significantly undermines emotional well-being among higher secondary students, while psychological hardiness serves as a crucial protective factor. Psychological hardiness not only enhances emotional well-being directly but also moderates the negative relationship between academic stress and emotional well-being. Students with higher levels of hardiness are better equipped to withstand academic pressure and maintain emotional stability.

These findings emphasise that emotional well-being in academic settings is shaped not only by external academic demands but also by internal resilience-based psychological resources. Strengthening psychological hardiness can play a vital role in promoting emotional health and academic adjustment during late adolescence. The study contributes to the existing literature by empirically establishing the moderating role of psychological hardiness at the higher secondary level within the Indian educational context.

In conclusion, fostering resilience and hardiness among students can lead to healthier academic environments, improved emotional well-being, and sustainable educational outcomes. Future research may explore longitudinal designs or intervention-based studies to further understand and enhance the role of psychological hardiness in academic stress management.

11. AUTHOR(S) CONTRIBUTION

The writers affirm that they have no connections to, or engagement with, any group or body that provides financial or non-financial assistance for the topics or resources covered in this Manuscript.

12. CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

13. PLAGIARISM POLICY

All authors declare that any kind of violation of plagiarism, copyright and ethical matters will be taken care of by all authors. Journal and editors are not liable for aforesaid matters.

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