

Research Article

## Between GPA and Peace of Mind Academic Pressure vs Mental Health of Gen Z

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**Abstract:** Generation Z students face increasingly complex academic challenges within the competitive higher education ecosystem. The pressure to maintain academic performance, social expectations, and intense digital exposure contribute to rising mental health issues such as stress, anxiety, and burnout. This study aims to analyze the relationship between academic pressure and the psychological condition of Gen Z students using a quantitative-descriptive approach through an online survey. The research instrument adapted the Academic Stress Scale (ASS) and the Depression Anxiety Stress Scale (DASS-21). The results show that the majority of respondents experience significant academic pressure, which correlates positively with symptoms of stress and anxiety. These findings highlight the importance of educational system reform that not only emphasizes academic performance but also supports students' mental well-being. Higher education institutions are expected to provide safe spaces, reliable counseling services, and more empathetic teaching approaches in response to the mental health issues facing this generation.

**Keywords:** Generation Z; Academic pressure; Student mental health; Stress and anxiety; Higher education.

### 1. Introduction

Generation Z students, born between 1997 and 2012, face increasingly complex academic challenges in higher education. The high academic workload, the demand for maximum achievement, and intense competition are the main factors that trigger psychological pressure. Students from Generation Z live in an era that is fast-paced and full of demands. As digital natives, they are accustomed to multitasking with various academic and non-academic activities simultaneously. However, behind their ability to adapt to technology, Gen Z students also face significant challenges in higher education, particularly related to academic pressure and mental health. Dasein, or the current existential condition, shows that many students experience stress, anxiety, and even symptoms of depression directly related to the high academic burden.

Ideally, higher education institutions should not only be a place for acquiring knowledge but also a space for healthy mental growth for students. The academic environment should support the balance between intellectual achievements and psychological well-being. However, in reality, the pressure to maintain GPA, complete assignments in short timeframes, and meet the expectations of parents and professors often cause students to neglect their mental health. This imbalance becomes a serious threat to the quality of learning and long-term educational success.

The increasing prevalence of mental health disorders among students began after the COVID-19 pandemic. The World Health Organization (WHO) reports that approximately 1 in 7 adolescents and young adults experience mental disorders, with academic pressure being one of the contributing factors. In Indonesia, the rise in the number of students accessing counseling services on campus is also a tangible indicator that this issue needs to be addressed systematically and with data-driven approaches. Without proper intervention, the quality of

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human resources produced by higher education institutions may be impacted by chronic mental health issues.

Several studies have examined the relationship between academic pressure and students' mental health. Research by Al-Qaisy (2011) found a significant correlation between the level of academic pressure and levels of anxiety and depression among university students in Jordan. Similarly, a study by Deb et al. (2015) in India revealed that academic pressure, combined with parental pressure, is directly linked to high levels of stress and psychological disorders among students. However, neither of these studies specifically explores the Gen Z population with its unique characteristics and social context.

Currently, there are still many studies that have not explored Generation Z in depth. This generation is unique in the sense that they are more open to mental health issues, more digitally connected, but also more vulnerable to social and academic pressures due to the high expectations from their surroundings. Therefore, the results of studies focused on previous generations may not necessarily be relevant or applicable to today's Gen Z students. Research focusing on the experiences of Gen Z in higher education will enrich perspectives and provide more accurate contextual data.

Thus, this study aims to understand in depth how academic pressure affects the mental health of Gen Z students in the higher education environment. This research is expected to serve as a foundation for educational institutions to design academic and psychosocial programs that not only strive for achievement but also consider the mental and emotional balance of students as part of sustainable learning quality.

## 2. Literature Review

The core issue addressed in this study centers on the increasing academic pressure experienced by Generation Z students within higher education environments. Students from this generation face various expectations and demands from the education system, their families, and even from themselves, which culminate in psychological pressure that cannot be overlooked. Academic pressure in this context extends beyond the burden of assignments and grades. It also encompasses the need to adapt socially and emotionally within a competitive collegiate atmosphere. Academic pressure is therefore understood as an external factor that can significantly impact students' mental balance.

Previous studies have indeed highlighted the connection between academic pressure and students' mental health. However, most have not specifically targeted the Generation Z population, which possesses unique characteristics. Generation Z is known to be more open about mental health issues, exhibit different communication patterns, and show heightened sensitivity to social pressures internalized through digital media. As a result, research that generalizes all student generations without considering generational aspects risks overlooking the specific dynamics experienced by Generation Z. This study seeks to fill that gap by examining the relationship between academic pressure and the psychological condition of Generation Z students in particular.

A study by Beiter et al. 2015 revealed that students experiencing intense academic pressure reported significantly higher levels of anxiety, stress, and depression compared to those with lower academic pressure. In that study, academic pressure emerged as one of the primary contributing factors to poor mental health among students across various higher education institutions in the United States. This finding reinforces the notion that academic pressure is not merely a local or individual issue but a systemic problem that must be taken seriously by educational institutions around the world, including those in Indonesia.

## 3. Method

This study employs a quantitative descriptive approach using a survey method focused on collecting data from Generation Z students in higher education settings. This approach was chosen to obtain a systematic and measurable understanding of the relationship between academic pressure and students' mental health conditions. Through this approach, the data collected can be statistically analyzed to identify patterns, trends, and correlations among variables in the studied population.

The population in this research consists of active Generation Z college students, specifically those born between 1997 and 2012, who are currently enrolled in public and private universities in Indonesia. The sampling technique used is purposive sampling, with inclusion criteria such as being an active undergraduate student (bachelor or applied bachelor level),

aged between 18 and 26 years, and willing to participate by completing the questionnaire in full. The sample size was determined using Slovin's formula based on an estimated number of Generation Z students in the targeted institutions, with a 95 percent confidence level.

The primary instrument in this study is a structured questionnaire consisting of three sections. The first section collects demographic information such as age, gender, level of study, and academic program. The second section measures the level of academic pressure using an adaptation of the Academic Stress Scale ASS developed by Kohn and Frazer in 1986. The third section assesses mental health conditions using the Depression Anxiety Stress Scale DASS 21 developed by Lovibond and Lovibond in 1995, which has been validated in the Indonesian context. The questionnaire was distributed online via Google Forms and social media channels managed by student organizations and campus service units. Prior to mass distribution, the instrument was tested for validity and reliability to ensure data quality.

Data collection was conducted collectively using a verification system that allowed each respondent to submit only once using an institutional email address. The collected data were analyzed using the latest version of SPSS software. Data analysis included descriptive statistics to illustrate respondent profiles and distributions of academic pressure and mental health conditions, Pearson correlation tests to examine relationships between variables, and simple linear regression analysis to determine the extent to which academic pressure influences stress, anxiety, and depression among Generation Z students.

In its implementation, this research adhered to ethical research principles including maintaining the anonymity and confidentiality of respondents' data, ensuring voluntary participation through informed consent, and avoiding any incentives or coercion toward participants. The entire research procedure was designed to maintain scientific integrity while protecting the rights and comfort of respondents as research subjects.

This study is also supported by several scholarly references that strengthen its conceptual and methodological foundations. Studies by Son et al. 2020 and Zhang and Ma 2020 found that mental health disorders among students increased significantly after the COVID 19 pandemic, which is relevant to the context of this research. Additionally, Ariani 2022 highlighted academic pressure as a systemic issue in Indonesia's higher education landscape. The use of internationally and nationally validated scales such as ASS and DASS 21 ensures that this research stands on a robust and relevant methodological basis.

#### 4. Results and Discussion

Generation Z students experience extremely high academic pressure in today's competitive higher education environment. The questionnaire results show that most respondents immediately feel anxious when their GPA drops, even slightly. They perceive GPA not only as an indicator of academic achievement but also as a reflection of self-worth and value in the eyes of their families and society. This perception indicates the internalization of perfectionist values within the education system. According to Shankar and Park (2016), these values may lead to anxiety, stress, and depression if students lack adequate coping strategies.

Besides GPA, daily academic workloads contribute significantly to students' mental burden. Many respondents report experiencing overthinking when they face numerous assignments at the same time. Overthinking does not represent a trivial complaint. It reflects an accumulation of unprocessed academic stress. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) explain that this stress occurs when students perceive academic demands as exceeding their personal resources without receiving sufficient external support.

Burnout symptoms appear more frequently during midterm and final exam periods. Almost all respondents claim that they feel physically and mentally exhausted. They report symptoms such as insomnia, loss of motivation, and emotional fatigue. Maslach and Jackson (1981) identify burnout as a dangerous syndrome that negatively impacts both academic performance and long-term health. Unfortunately, educational institutions often overlook this issue.

Academic pressure also originates from family expectations. Many students admit that they fear disappointing their parents when they fail to meet academic expectations. In collectivist cultures like Indonesia, society views a child's success as a reflection of parental success. Deb et al. (2015) find that parental pressure contributes significantly to psychological problems among university students in developing countries.

Students also face pressure from social media. Most of them feel intimidated by their peers' academic or professional accomplishments shared online. Vogel et al. (2014) define

this phenomenon as social comparison bias. This condition arises when individuals evaluate themselves negatively after comparing themselves to others online. Continuous exposure to this pattern leads to feelings of inadequacy and worsens mental health conditions.

Despite these pressures, many students choose not to express their emotional distress openly. They often pretend to be fine and hide their struggles. Eisenberg et al. (2012) describe this behavior as emotional masking, which involves suppressing emotional expression. This suppression intensifies psychological suffering and increases the risk of undetected mental illness.

Students frequently continue completing tasks despite experiencing fatigue and mental stress. Many of them feel guilty when they are not productive. This behavior reveals a pattern of toxic productivity. Tang and Ferguson (2022) explain that students experiencing toxic productivity often feel guilty while resting and cannot identify their physical or emotional limits.

Digital addiction also contributes to students' mental fatigue. Although students are aware that excessive social media use increases their stress levels, they still find it difficult to disconnect from their devices. Montag et al. (2021) call this condition digital fatigue, which results from continuous digital content consumption without adequate emotional recovery.

Students also experience identity crises. Many respondents say they fear being labeled failures or unsuccessful. They define success narrowly, based only on academic or financial achievements. Twenge (2017) suggests that Generation Z commonly struggles with identity development in the digital era.

Social comparisons also negatively affect students' motivation and emotional well-being. Many students feel discouraged and socially isolated when they see others succeed. Huang (2017) argues that frequent upward comparisons can reduce self-esteem and cause social anxiety, especially in competitive academic settings.

Students report that they lack safe spaces to share their emotional burdens. Most feel that existing campus counseling services are ineffective and emotionally distant. Some even fear being labeled weak if they seek psychological help. Rickwood et al. (2005) emphasize the importance of accessible and trustworthy counseling services for students.

Peer pressure also increases academic pressure. Students do not only compete over academic performance but also over who appears the busiest or most successful. Smith and Nichols (2015) explain that this internal competition reduces solidarity and increases anxiety among students in academic communities.

Differences in students' stress management abilities further marginalize those who are mentally vulnerable. The academic system often neglects students who need psychological support and favors those with high academic performance. Luthar and Kumar (2018) warn that rigid meritocratic systems can create a divide between resilient students and those who are mentally left behind.

Students hope that their institutions and lecturers can show empathy toward their mental health conditions. They believe that heavy course loads, tight deadlines, and authoritarian teaching styles worsen their mental health. The World Health Organization (2021) recommends that universities adopt a balanced academic approach that incorporates mental well-being and trains lecturers to recognize student burnout signs.

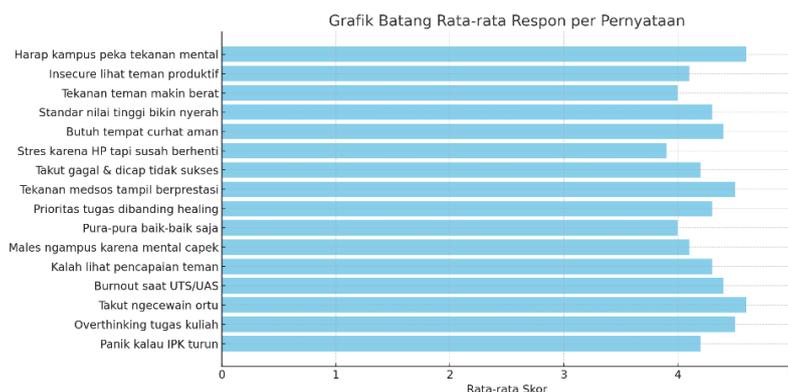


Figure 1.1 shows the data collected from students across multiple universities through a distributed questionnaire.

In conclusion, academic pressure on Generation Z students presents a multidimensional issue. It involves structural factors in the education system, social expectations, generational psychology, and digital life. Therefore, effective solutions must be collective and systemic. These include flexible curricula, more holistic assessment systems, safe and accessible counseling services, and mental health awareness programs across all academic levels. Students need more than a high GPA they need mental peace to develop as whole individuals.

## 6. Conclusions

Generation Z students face increasingly complex academic challenges amid the demands of a competitive higher education system. Academic pressures, ranging from GPA achievement to managing dense workloads, not only impact cognitive performance but also threaten psychological well-being. Ramachandiran and Dhanapal (2018) noted that the majority of students from this generation experience high levels of stress due to academic demands, which often lead to sleep disturbances and a decline in overall mental health. This highlights that academic pressure is a critical factor that educational institutions must address seriously.

Externally, social expectations and economic uncertainty further intensify the pressure experienced by students. As reported by Inside Higher Ed (2023), Generation Z is more vulnerable to stress and trauma due to the combination of academic demands and an unstable digital social environment. Students today must grapple not only with academic burdens but also with family expectations and social pressures constantly displayed online, often becoming sources of unhealthy comparison.

Moreover, anxiety about the future presents a distinct concern for Generation Z students. Dikeç and Erdem (2023) found that students from this generation experience significant anxiety regarding career uncertainty and future prospects, which further exacerbates their psychological distress. This indicates that support must extend beyond academic assistance to include identity formation and career readiness development.

Peer pressure is another factor that cannot be overlooked. Joseph and Sudheesh (2023) argue that peer influence can heighten academic stress and impair students' self-regulation abilities. This situation creates a domino effect where peer pressure to remain constantly productive may evolve into unhealthy competition that disrupts emotional balance and weakens students' resilience in fulfilling academic responsibilities.

In the face of these various stressors, mental toughness emerges as an essential competency. Ang et al. (2021) emphasize that mental resilience, cultivated through interpersonal relationships and social support, can mitigate the negative effects of stress on students. This suggests that mental health initiatives should not be limited to individual efforts but should also involve a collective support system within the university environment.

In addition to internal and social pressures, changes in the learning system especially in the post-pandemic context have added psychological strain. Clabaugh et al. (2021) indicate that unstructured online learning increases academic stress due to the lack of social interaction and difficulties in adapting to digital learning environments. This underlines the necessity for digital transformation in education to be accompanied by psycho-pedagogical approaches that are responsive to students' needs.

Furthermore, Zajacova et al. (2005) reveal that poorly managed academic stress significantly contributes to decreased academic performance and deteriorated psychological well-being. In the long term, this could undermine the quality of graduates and negatively impact the higher education process as a whole. Therefore, improving stress management and rebalancing academic workloads must become strategic priorities in building a mentally healthy educational system.

Finally, MacGeorge et al. (2005) stress that academic pressure is not merely an individual issue but a systemic problem requiring structural reform. Students need a more humane learning environment, one that goes beyond academic achievement and offers safe spaces to support emotional balance. Thus, a holistic effort from universities is needed to develop flexible curricula, provide accessible and trusted counseling services, and train faculty members to be more sensitive to mental health issues. Students need more than a high GPA they need peace of mind to grow holistically as both academic and social individuals.

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