

The Role of Self-Efficacy, Stress Management, and Perceived Social Support in Predicting the Academic Performance of University-Entrance Exam Students

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ABSTRACT

The present study aimed to examine the role of self-efficacy, stress management, and perceived social support in predicting the academic performance of university-entrance exam students. This study was applied in nature and descriptive-correlational in terms of statistical analysis. The study population consisted of all adolescents in Shiraz city in 2025 who were enrolled in secondary schools and volunteered to participate in the national university entrance exam. The sample included 200 adolescents who were selected using a cluster sampling method from secondary schools in Zone 2 of Shiraz city. The measurement tools included the Self-Efficacy Questionnaire (Schwarzer et al., 1982), the Multidimensional Perceived Social Support Scale (MSPSS), the Academic Performance Assessment Questionnaire by Fam and Taylor, and the Perceived Stress Management Questionnaire (PSS). The data obtained from the questionnaires were analyzed using SPSS software version 28. Pearson's test and multiple regression analysis were used to examine the research hypotheses. The results indicated that the family support component was significantly and positively able to predict academic performance ($p = 0.001$, $\beta = 0.328$). The support from significant others was significantly and positively able to predict academic performance ($p = 0.005$, $\beta = -0.287$). Stress management was significantly and positively able to predict academic performance ($p = 0.001$, $\beta = 0.345$), and self-efficacy was significantly and positively able to predict academic performance ($p = 0.001$, $\beta = 0.411$).

Keywords: Self-efficacy, stress management, perceived social support, academic performance

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Introduction

In recent decades, increasing academic competition and growing psychological burdens on adolescents—particularly those preparing for high-stakes university entrance examinations—have underscored the need to explore predictors of academic performance beyond cognitive ability. Among the psychosocial variables

influencing academic achievement, self-efficacy, stress management, and perceived social support have emerged as significant contributors. Each of these factors not only affects a student's motivation and resilience but also determines their capacity to cope with academic demands and psychological stressors (1, 2).

Self-efficacy, introduced by Bandura (1997), refers to individuals' beliefs in their ability to perform specific tasks and attain goals. In educational settings, academic self-efficacy has consistently been associated with improved performance, greater effort, and persistence in the face of challenges (3, 4). When students believe they can succeed academically, they are more likely to approach learning tasks with confidence and perseverance. This belief shapes both their learning behaviors and emotional responses to academic stress (5). Research suggests that students with higher self-efficacy tend to use more effective learning strategies and demonstrate greater academic motivation (6, 7). Moreover, in the context of university-entrance exams—widely recognized as a major source of stress in countries like Iran—self-efficacy becomes a psychological buffer, protecting students from performance anxiety and enabling goal-directed behavior (2, 4).

Parallel to self-efficacy, the ability to manage stress effectively is a critical skill for academic success. Adolescents facing the intense pressure of national exams often experience heightened levels of stress, which, if unmanaged, can lead to cognitive dysfunction, emotional dysregulation, and academic burnout (8, 9). Effective stress management entails both psychological strategies—such as emotional regulation, mindfulness, and adaptive coping—and physiological self-regulation. Recent empirical studies affirm that stress management skills are positively correlated with academic outcomes, particularly among students under chronic academic strain (10, 11). Moreover, research during the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the vulnerability of students to stress-induced declines in performance, reinforcing the relevance of stress management in times of uncertainty (12, 13).

Adding a critical interpersonal dimension to this equation is perceived social support—the sense of being emotionally and instrumentally supported by others. Social support has been extensively documented as a psychological resource that enhances resilience and mitigates the negative impact of stress on well-being and academic performance (14, 15). The buffering hypothesis suggests that when students feel supported—by family, peers, or mentors—they experience lower levels of distress and exhibit stronger problem-solving skills. Perceived social support fosters emotional stability, enhances motivation, and provides practical help during academic challenges (16, 17). This is particularly salient in collectivist societies, where family involvement plays a dominant role in adolescents' educational trajectories (18, 19). In such contexts, family support has been found to significantly predict students' academic outcomes, acting as both a psychological anchor and a motivational driver (10, 20).

Furthermore, the interaction between these variables deserves attention. Self-efficacy is both shaped by and reinforces perceptions of social support, as supportive environments encourage mastery experiences and confidence (5, 21). Similarly, stress management capacity can be enhanced through social resources, as emotionally supportive relationships buffer against stress and promote the use of adaptive coping strategies (13, 16). Moreover, research has shown that students with high self-efficacy are more likely to interpret stressors as challenges rather than threats, thereby employing more effective coping mechanisms (6, 22).

This dynamic interplay highlights the need for integrated models that examine these variables collectively, rather than in isolation.

From a developmental perspective, adolescence is a sensitive period marked by identity formation, emotional variability, and increased reliance on peer and family networks (23, 24). In the face of academic pressures, adolescents' psychological resources and social ecosystems play crucial roles in shaping their academic behavior. This understanding has prompted numerous empirical studies to explore how psychological constructs such as self-efficacy, perceived stress, and social support predict academic performance in high-risk student groups (11, 17). Notably, recent findings underscore that students with higher perceived social support and stress management skills demonstrate better adjustment to school demands, higher grades, and reduced dropout intentions (25, 26).

These findings carry critical implications for educational policy and psychological interventions. As academic achievement becomes an increasingly competitive domain, particularly in contexts with high-stakes testing systems, psychological and social factors must be integrated into educational support frameworks. Supporting students holistically—not just through curricular improvements but also via counseling, family engagement, and stress-reduction interventions—can meaningfully enhance academic outcomes (8, 20). Furthermore, incorporating psychoeducation about stress, fostering supportive peer environments, and strengthening self-belief systems through mentoring and coaching could amplify students' success, particularly among vulnerable and underrepresented populations (11, 27).

Despite a growing body of evidence, there remains a research gap in studies that simultaneously examine self-efficacy, stress management, and perceived social support as joint predictors of academic performance, especially in adolescents facing entrance examinations. Previous investigations have largely focused on one or two variables in isolation, failing to capture the complex interplay of cognitive, emotional, and interpersonal processes that shape learning outcomes (7, 28). The present study aims to fill this gap by investigating the combined roles of these three constructs in predicting academic performance among high school students preparing for the national university entrance exam in Shiraz, Iran.

In light of the theoretical and empirical foundations outlined above, the central question of this research is whether self-efficacy, stress management, and perceived social support can jointly predict academic performance in adolescents preparing for one of the most stressful educational transitions. Drawing on the theoretical model of self-efficacy (1), the stress-buffering theory (16), and the social capital framework (17), this study aims to contribute to the expanding literature on adolescent educational psychology and inform evidence-based practices to foster academic resilience and success.

Methods and Materials

Study Design and Participants

The present study is applied in terms of its objective, quantitative in nature, and descriptive-correlational in terms of statistical analysis, focusing on predictive relationships between two or more variables. The study population consisted of all adolescents in Shiraz city in 2025 who were enrolled in secondary schools and volunteered to participate in the national university entrance exam. The sample included 200 adolescents selected using cluster sampling from secondary schools in Zone 2 of Shiraz city. Data collection took place at two levels: field and library. Initially, at the library level, the relevant resources were reviewed. Then, after

obtaining permission to distribute the questionnaire, data were collected in the field using the questionnaires related to the research variables, and finally, after gathering the data, the questionnaires were analyzed. In conducting this research, the following ethical considerations were taken into account: 1) Participants were assured that the information obtained from this research would remain personal and confidential. 2) Participants were assured that the results of the research would be presented as aggregate conclusions and not individually. 3) Participants were informed that there was no requirement to provide their first and last names on the questionnaires.

Data Collection

Self-Efficacy Questionnaire: This questionnaire was developed by Schwarzer et al. in 1982 and contains 17 items. It measures an individual's beliefs regarding their ability to overcome various situations. The questionnaire is based on a five-point Likert scale, where a response of "strongly disagree" scores 1, and "strongly agree" scores 5. High scores reflect a strong sense of self-efficacy in the individual. Schwarzer et al. (1982) reported a Cronbach's alpha of 0.86 for this scale. Their studies also indicated a positive correlation between the scores on this questionnaire and success in work and education. Karamati (2004) also reported a Cronbach's alpha of 0.86 for Iranian samples.

Multidimensional Perceived Social Support Scale (MSPSS): The Multidimensional Perceived Social Support Scale (MSPSS) is a 12-item tool developed by Zimet et al. (1988) to assess perceived social support from three sources: family, friends, and significant others. This scale measures the perceived level of social support from these three areas and consists of three subscales: Family (items 3, 4, 8, 11), Friends (items 6, 7, 9, 12), and Significant Others (items 1, 2, 5, 10). The MSPSS is a short, simple, and time-sensitive tool, which is why it has been widely used in many studies. Psychometric properties of the MSPSS have been examined in various samples. In the latest study, the sample included 154 college students (122 females and 32 males), with an average age of 26.5 years. The overall average score for the test was 5.58 (SD = 1.07), for the Family subscale it was 5.31 (SD = 1.46), for the Friends subscale it was 5.50 (SD = 1.25), and for the Significant Others subscale it was 5.94 (SD = 1.34). In this scale, responses range from "strongly disagree" (1 point) to "strongly agree" (7 points). To obtain the total score, the scores for all items are summed and divided by the number of items (12). For each subscale, the scores of the corresponding items are summed and divided by the number of items in that subscale (4). Higher scores indicate a higher level of perceived social support.

Academic Performance Measurement Questionnaire: The Academic Performance Measurement Questionnaire is an adaptation of the research by Fam and Taylor (1999) and has been validated for the Iranian population in the context of academic performance. This tool, with 48 questions, measures five areas related to academic performance. The questionnaire is scored on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from "none" (1) to "very much" (5). In a study by Qoltaash et al., the content validity of the questionnaire was confirmed by experts, and its reliability was calculated as 84% using Cronbach's alpha. In the Fam and Taylor (1999) study, factor analysis was used to calculate the validity, which showed high validity. In this study, the Cronbach's alpha for the questionnaire was 0.87.

Perceived Stress Management Questionnaire (PSS): The Perceived Stress Management Questionnaire (PSS) was developed by Cohen et al. in 1983 and contains 14 questions designed to measure

general perceived stress over the past month. It assesses thoughts and feelings about stressful events, control, coping, and experiences of stress. The scale is based on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree" (from 0 to 5 points). The highest score that an individual can obtain is 56, and the lowest is 0. Higher scores indicate higher perceived stress in the past month. Dorian et al. (2006) reported a Cronbach's alpha of 0.74 for this questionnaire. In Iran, a study by Behrozi et al. (2012) calculated the reliability of the Perceived Stress Questionnaire using Cronbach's alpha and split-half methods, resulting in values of 0.73 and 0.74, respectively. The construct validity of the questionnaire was calculated using simple correlation with a researcher-made criterion question, yielding a value of 0.63, which was statistically significant at the 0.05 level.

Data analysis

The data obtained from the questionnaires were analyzed using SPSS version 28. This study used both descriptive and inferential statistical indices. Descriptive statistics were used to calculate the mean, standard deviation, and range of the variables. Additionally, Pearson's test and multiple regression analysis were employed to examine the research hypotheses.

Findings and Results

Table 1 presents the frequency and percentage of demographic variables of the participant groups based on age and gender.

Table 1. Frequency and Percentage of Demographic Variables

Variable	Group	Number	Percentage
Gender	Female	100	50
	Male	100	50
Age	18	70	35
	19	81	40
	20	49	25

As shown in Table 2, the mean and standard deviation for family support among participants are 14.09 and 4.09, respectively. The mean and standard deviation for friends' support are 12.68 and 3.65, respectively. The mean and standard deviation for support from significant others are 13.55 and 4.11, respectively, while the mean and standard deviation for stress management are 38.98 and 5.34, respectively. The mean and standard deviation for self-efficacy are 45.49 and 6.65, respectively, and the mean and standard deviation for academic performance are 137.09 and 15.73, respectively.

Table 2. Mean and Standard Deviation of Research Variables

Variables	Dimensions	Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Perceived Social Support	Family Support	14.09	4.09	6	25
	Friends Support	12.68	3.65	7	23
	Support from Significant Others	13.55	4.11	6	24
Stress Management		38.98	5.34	24	59
Self-Efficacy		45.49	6.65	24	72
Academic Performance		137.09	15.73	66	189

Table 3 shows the Pearson correlation test for examining the relationships between the research variables. As observed, there is a positive and significant relationship between family support and academic

performance ($p = 0.001$, $\beta = 0.328$). There is a positive and significant relationship between friends' support and academic performance ($p = 0.005$, $\beta = 0.279$). A positive and significant relationship exists between support from significant others and academic performance ($p = 0.043$, $\beta = 0.176$). There is a positive and significant relationship between stress management and academic performance ($p = 0.001$, $\beta = 0.374$), and a positive and significant relationship exists between self-efficacy and academic performance ($p = 0.001$, $\beta = 0.398$).

Table 3. Pearson Correlation Matrix Between Research Variables

	Family Support	Friends Support	Support from Significant Others	Stress Management	Self-Efficacy	Academic Performance
Family Support	1					
Friends Support	0.326	1				
Support from Significant Others	0.299	0.518	1			
Stress Management	0.249	0.329	0.283	1		
Self-Efficacy	0.277	0.328	0.439	0.226	1	
Academic Performance	0.328	0.279	0.176	0.374	0.398	1

$p \leq 0.05^*$; $*p \leq 0.01$

To predict academic performance based on self-efficacy, stress management, and perceived social support, multiple regression analysis was used. The results of this analysis are presented in Table 4. As shown in Table 4, the R value is 0.603 and the R^2 value is 0.363. This means that self-efficacy, stress management, and perceived social support explain 36% of the variance in academic performance scores. Furthermore, the family support component is positively and significantly able to predict academic performance ($p = 0.001$, $\beta = 0.328$). The support from significant others is positively and significantly able to predict academic performance ($p = 0.005$, $\beta = 0.287$). Stress management is positively and significantly able to predict academic performance ($p = 0.001$, $\beta = 0.345$), and self-efficacy is positively and significantly able to predict academic performance ($p = 0.001$, $\beta = 0.411$).

Table 4. Multiple Regression Analysis for Predicting Academic Performance Based on Self-Efficacy, Stress Management, and Perceived Social Support

Dependent Variable: Academic Performance	Independent Variable	R	R^2	F	P	β	t	P
Family Support		0.573	0.328	57.84	0.001	0.328	3.42	0.001
Friends Support		0.110	1.236	1.67	0.167			
Support from Significant Others		0.287	3.97	0.005				
Stress Management		0.345	2.76	0.001				
Self-Efficacy		0.411	4.36	0.001				

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of the present study reveal that self-efficacy, stress management, and perceived social support significantly and positively predict academic performance in university-entrance exam students. Among the components of social support, family support emerged as the strongest predictor, followed by support from significant others, while support from friends did not reach statistical significance in the regression model. Moreover, self-efficacy demonstrated the highest beta coefficient among all predictors, indicating its robust influence on students' academic outcomes. These results align with a growing body of literature that emphasizes the critical role of psychological and interpersonal variables in shaping educational success, particularly in contexts involving high-stakes assessments.

The positive relationship between self-efficacy and academic performance observed in this study reinforces Bandura's theoretical framework, which posits that individuals with a high sense of efficacy approach challenging tasks with confidence and persistence (1). Consistent with this, students in the current sample who believed in their academic abilities performed better on academic tasks. This finding is echoed in studies by (4) and (3), which reported that academic self-efficacy significantly enhances students' motivation, persistence, and achievement. Additionally, research by (5) supports the idea that self-efficacy influences students' ability to regulate their learning processes, which in turn contributes to higher academic outcomes. The findings are also corroborated by the work of (6), who demonstrated that students with higher levels of self-efficacy show greater resilience when facing academic stressors. These results underline the importance of reinforcing students' self-belief systems, particularly during periods of intense academic pressure such as national entrance examinations.

The present study also confirmed that effective stress management positively predicts academic performance. Students with higher perceived stress management scores reported better academic outcomes. This is in line with findings from (8) and (9), who emphasized that unregulated stress impairs cognitive functioning and concentration, thus hampering performance. The results are further supported by the work of (10), who found that stress management competencies enable students to adopt more adaptive coping strategies, thereby improving their academic engagement. Research during the COVID-19 pandemic—such as that by (12) and (13)—also highlighted the role of stress management in maintaining academic performance amid crisis conditions. Moreover, (16) pointed out that stress regulation mechanisms, when integrated with mindfulness and self-compassion, have positive effects on academic success by reducing anxiety and emotional reactivity.

Another key finding of this study is the significant role of perceived social support—particularly from family and significant others—in predicting academic performance. These findings affirm the protective function of social support, which has been widely recognized in the literature. According to (14), emotional and instrumental support from close relationships fosters students' psychological well-being and academic perseverance. Similarly, (15) showed that perceived social support contributes to higher academic achievement by promoting motivation, self-confidence, and problem-solving skills. The strong effect of family support found in this study mirrors findings by (10) and (20), who noted that familial involvement serves as a key facilitator of academic motivation and persistence in Iranian adolescents. Interestingly, while support from friends was correlated with academic performance, it did not predict performance in the regression model—perhaps indicating that peer support may be more relevant to emotional well-being than directly to academic success, as suggested by (17) and (11).

These findings also resonate with the social capital theory, which underscores the influence of relational resources on educational attainment. As (18) and (16) argued, individuals with greater access to emotional and instrumental support networks are better equipped to navigate academic demands. The buffering hypothesis proposed by (13) further explains how social support moderates the effects of stress, contributing indirectly to academic success. Moreover, the interaction between self-efficacy and social support is evident in the findings of (21), who demonstrated that supportive environments reinforce students' confidence and engagement, thereby enhancing performance outcomes.

The interplay among self-efficacy, stress management, and perceived social support observed in this study also reflects the complex, multifactorial nature of academic achievement. Rather than being solely the product of intellectual ability, success in high-stakes academic settings depends on a network of psychological, emotional, and social factors. This holistic view is supported by the integrated models presented by (19) and (24), who emphasized the role of emotional regulation, support systems, and self-perceptions in shaping learning behavior and academic identity. Likewise, the study by (25) highlighted the potential mental health costs of academic overachievement when psychological resources and social support systems are not adequately developed.

The current study contributes to the growing literature that advocates for a multidimensional approach to academic success, especially for students in high-pressure educational contexts. These findings suggest that enhancing self-efficacy, teaching stress management skills, and building strong social support networks are essential strategies for improving academic outcomes. They also align with findings from (22), who reported that prenatal stress and lack of support are key predictors of postnatal emotional distress—emphasizing the life-span relevance of social support and stress regulation. In the same vein, (27) validated psychological injury risk indicators as predictors of performance outcomes in occupational settings, which may have implications for educational environments as well.

Despite the valuable insights provided by this study, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the cross-sectional design limits the ability to infer causal relationships among the variables. While significant associations were found, longitudinal studies are needed to confirm whether improvements in self-efficacy, stress management, or perceived social support lead to sustained academic gains over time. Second, the reliance on self-report measures may introduce response bias, as participants might have provided socially desirable answers. Third, the sample was limited to adolescents in Shiraz, Iran, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings to other cultural or educational contexts. Moreover, the specific focus on university-entrance exam students may not capture the full range of academic behaviors across different educational levels.

Future research should explore these relationships using longitudinal and experimental designs to better assess causality and intervention effects. Studies could also examine the moderating roles of gender, socioeconomic status, and school environment in shaping the impact of self-efficacy, stress management, and social support. Additionally, qualitative studies might provide deeper insights into the lived experiences of students navigating high-stakes exams and the personal meanings they assign to support and stress. Further, examining the digital dimensions of social support—especially in an increasingly virtual learning environment—would enrich the literature on academic resilience in the post-pandemic era.

In practical terms, the results of this study emphasize the importance of fostering students' psychological strengths and social environments. Educators, counselors, and policymakers should prioritize programs that build self-efficacy and stress management skills, such as resilience training, mindfulness workshops, and performance coaching. Schools should also engage families as active partners in the academic journey, recognizing their pivotal role in supporting students emotionally and motivationally. Peer mentoring programs and supportive classroom climates can further enhance perceived social support and academic motivation. Collectively, these interventions can create a nurturing ecosystem that enables adolescents to thrive academically and emotionally.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants. Written consent was obtained from all participants in the study.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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