

# THE PROCRASTINATION EPIDEMIC: EXPLORING ACADEMIC PROCRASTINATION AMONG MEDICAL STUDENTS

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## ABSTRACT

**Objective:** To explore academic procrastination from the perspective of medical students.

**Methodology:** An exploratory qualitative study design with a case study approach was adopted for this study. A semi-structured interview guide was used to conduct seven interviews with medical students from various public and private medical colleges under three different universities and in two provinces of Pakistan, at which time the saturation point was achieved. The interviews were conducted online via Zoom, recorded and transcribed. Thematic analysis was undertaken using triangulation.

**Results:** Through thematic analysis, five major themes emerged, reflecting the complexity of academic procrastination among medical students. "The Procrastination Paradox – A Love-Hate Relationship" showed that Most Medical students are aware of their procrastination habits and recognize their negative consequences. "The Medical Student Mindset – Why We Delay" showed that students procrastinate for various reasons, including perfectionism, stress, and lack of interest. "The Digital Distraction Trap" highlighted the role of technology, especially social media and streaming platforms, plays a major role in enabling procrastination. "Last-Minute Heroes – Thriving or Crumbling Under Pressure" showed that Some students thrive under last-minute pressure while others find themselves overwhelmed. The last theme, "Breaking the Cycle – What Works and What Doesn't," was based on the student's attempts at various strategies to overcome procrastination, with mixed success.

**Conclusions:** Academic procrastination among MBBS students is a complex phenomenon determined by psychological, environmental, and structural variables. Although procrastination is sometimes seen as helpful by some students in boosting productivity at the last moment, it most commonly contributes to stress, anxiety and poor mental health. Proven strategies like peer accountability, organized study plans, and consistency have been found to counter procrastination more effectively than self-discipline.

**Keywords:** Academic, Procrastination, Medical Students, Undergraduate, Medical Education.

## INTRODUCTION

Procrastination means the act or habit of delaying or putting off something, specifically something that requires immediate attention. Students procrastinate even with crucial tasks like submitting an assignment or studying for high-stakes exams.<sup>1</sup>

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Generally it is considered as a negative trait since it prevents the person from being productive and is linked to low self-esteem, guilt, depression and feelings of inadequacy. Academic procrastination is a global issue, and all students procrastinate at some point or another in their academic life.<sup>2</sup> Procrastination seems to get worse if the tasks are perceived as unpleasant or as if they are demanding. Medical School studies are very tough and it's a constant and unswerving pursuit. Students often experience stress, anxiety, crisis and social disapproval if deadlines and responsibilities are not achieved.<sup>3</sup> Procrastination has been perceived in students as a widespread and pernicious habit and can be observed in students who do not develop self-regulation.<sup>4</sup>

Studies have, however found a negative correlation between procrastination and academic performance and have explored the relationship of procrastination with negative behaviour outcomes, like guilt, low self-esteem and depression.<sup>5,6</sup> Students that are unable to

manage their time efficiently are more prone to procrastination and ultimately get poor grades in examinations. As seen from different studies, the negative habit of delaying is more common in males compared to females,<sup>6</sup> who are usually more responsible and concerned about their studies. Research established that younger students at the college level were more prone to procrastination than their elder peers who were studying in higher classes, illustrating that the maturity level of younger students is low and they are incapable of handling the responsibility of their studies and performance.<sup>7</sup> Studies show that the pattern of procrastination among medical students also relates to poor attributes, such as narcissism. A study done in Pakistan revealed that unhappy and procrastinating individuals constitute a major proportion of the community of medical students.<sup>8</sup>

The present study aims to explore the phenomenon of academic procrastination from the perspective of MBBS students. Given the intense academic and emotional challenges faced by MBBS students, it is essential to understand how procrastination manifests and how it can be mitigated to improve student well-being and academic outcomes.

## METHODOLOGY

An exploratory qualitative study design with a case study approach was adopted for this study. A semi-structured interview guide was developed and piloted to explore the experiences and perceptions of MBBS students regarding academic procrastination. The guide covered key areas such as students' awareness of procrastination, its causes, impacts, coping mechanisms, and potential solutions. Pilot testing was conducted to ensure the clarity and relevance of the questions before final implementation.

Ethical approval No: 2079, dated 20/08/2024, was obtained from the hospital research and ethical committee (IREB) of HMC. Purposive sampling was used to select participants. After Informed written consent and assurance of anonymity, seven semi-structured interviews were conducted with MBBS students from various public and private medical colleges under three different universities and in two provinces of Pakistan, at which time the saturation point was achieved. The interviews were conducted online via Zoom, with each session lasting between 40 minutes to one hour. The interviews were recorded and transcribed.

The many aspects of the quality of this qualitative research were ensured. Respondent validation of the interview transcripts was done. Dependability was ensured by keeping the audit trail. Thematic analysis was undertaken with Triangulation of transcripts.

## RESULTS

Through thematic analysis, five major themes emerged, reflecting the complexity of academic procrastination among medical students. The findings highlight the interplay between psychological, environmental, and structural factors influencing procrastination, along with students' coping mechanisms.

### Theme 1: The Procrastination Paradox – A Love-Hate Relationship

Most Medical students are aware of their procrastination habits and recognize their negative consequences. However, despite their frustration, they find themselves caught in a cycle of delaying tasks, experiencing guilt, and scrambling to complete work at the last minute. Some students justify their procrastination by claiming they perform better under pressure, while others are even proud of it.

Table 1: Subthemes and Representative Responses for Theme 1

Subtheme	Representative Quotes
Knowing it's bad, but doing it anyway	<p><i>"Even if I have an exam tomorrow, I would like lay down in my bed, or do something else or read a book or go to a cafe or something else."</i></p> <p><i>"I keep thinking I should have done so and so. That I should have had that same discipline, which I brought in from my Cadet College. But yeah, I didn't, and I took it lightly."</i></p> <p><i>"I have felt that nowadays, people are being proud of procrastinating. In a sense, like they really justify themselves like 'that ain't a big deal."</i></p>
The guilt-stress cycle: Delay, regret, repeat	<i>"Yeah, it's guilt. I'll be straightforward, it's guilt. I never feel comfortable with the feeling that I have procrastinated. it's never an okay or a good feeling."</i>

	<p><i>"It definitely makes me feel guilty, because I know through trial and error, if I do this right now, it will be relief for me. But I end up procrastinating anyway. I don't think anyone can help it, so it does make me feel really guilty."</i></p> <p><i>"My guilt or my regret kind of motivates me, or pushes me towards studying again. So it's a vicious cycle."</i></p>
<b>I work better under pressure!</b>	<p><i>"I know when I'm under pressure, when I'm on deadlines, I tend to do things more quickly, and I'm able to retain everything much better."</i></p> <p><i>"Some people justified it with the notion that procrastination is somehow recharging yourself for the battle that you will fight in the last minute. No, I think consistency is the key."</i></p>

### Theme 2: The Medical Student Mindset – Why We Delay

Students procrastinate for various reasons, including perfectionism, stress, and lack of interest. Some students delay tasks because they feel conditions must be "just right" before they begin. Others find themselves overwhelmed by academic pressure, leading to avoidance. Additionally, students tend to procrastinate more on subjects they find uninteresting or difficult. Some procrastinate on easier tasks because they seem less urgent.

<b>Table 2: Subthemes and Representative Responses for Theme 2</b>	
<b>Subtheme</b>	<b>Representative Quotes</b>
<b>Perfectionism paralysis</b>	<p><i>"If I didn't wake up on time, I'll procrastinate. I'll be like, okay, I can do this tomorrow, because the timing isn't perfect, like, the environment isn't perfect."</i></p> <p><i>"I consider myself a perfectionist. But I tend to procrastinate before I start, because I need everything to be perfect."</i></p>
<b>Stress overload: When too much to do leads to doing nothing</b>	<p><i>"If you're super, super stressed about something, it just might feel less stressful to not do it."</i></p> <p><i>"I procrastinate about something I'm super stressed about, because if I don't do it, then I don't have to actually worry that 'oh, it's not happening.'"</i></p>
<b>Interest-driven effort: Boring subjects get the backseat</b>	<p><i>"If a person is interested in a particular subject, they won't procrastinate on it. Interest and motivation are major factors why a student may or may not procrastinate."</i></p> <p><i>"I'm thinking of community medicine, because I know that I didn't do it the whole year, and I only did it in preps because it is incredibly boring to me."</i></p> <p><i>"And biochemistry too. Like I find people procrastinate on that too."</i></p> <p><i>"In my circle, they don't study forensic and community. I don't know what's the reason behind it. In terms of our own, our long-term careers, and they won't be beneficial to us in the long term. So, we kind of avoid it."</i></p>
<b>Easy Task Avoidance Spiral</b>	<p><i>"If you ask for me, I tend to procrastinate easy things. I don't know why, but in the back of my mind, I'm thinking the things which are difficult, they'll take more time, and in the end, when I am exhausted, I won't be able to do them properly. So why not start from the difficult things and then put the easy on the last. So by keeping the easy on the last, then they goes on and on, then days later, days are just passing by, and I am unable to complete them."</i></p>

### Theme 3: The Digital Distraction Trap

Technology, especially social media and streaming platforms, plays a major role in enabling procrastination. Many students acknowledge spending excessive time scrolling on social media or watching shows instead of studying. Some students engage in "productive" procrastination, such as reading books, to justify their delays.

Table 3: Subthemes and Representative Responses for Theme 3	
Subtheme	Representative Quotes
<b>Scrolling away success: Social media addictions</b>	<p><i>"Social media is highly prevalent, and it is the major, major reason why I would say social media use and Netflix, Amazon, these sort of apps lead to procrastination."</i></p> <p><i>"These apps are addictive. So mindless scrolling on these apps can last for hours without the users even realising while they constantly delay their pending tasks"</i></p> <p><i>"Who would want to study when you can watch 1000 reels?"</i></p>
<b>Instant gratification</b>	<p><i>"Why would someone want to do the task they have to do when you could just like, go watch Instagram or TikTok?"</i></p> <p><i>"Social media nowadays is very addictive, and the constant dopamine surges you get make you use it more often and delay your task because you are actually having momentarily fun."</i></p> <p><i>"I feel like our attention spans have become so short that the only way to engage you are these 30-second reels or shorts."</i></p>
<b>productive procrastination</b>	<p><i>"This might seem funny, maybe, but when I'm trying to delay a task, I do book reading instead."</i></p> <p><i>"For me, book reading is that distraction. So yes."</i></p>

#### Theme 4: Last-Minute Heroes – Thriving or Crumbling Under Pressure

Some students thrive under last-minute pressure, while others find themselves overwhelmed. Many reports have heightened productivity during exam season, but this approach often leads to compromised quality of work. others find that procrastination ultimately leads to stress and compromised performance,

Table 4: Subthemes and Representative Responses for Theme 4	
Subtheme	Representative Quotes
<b>The adrenaline rush of deadline-driven studying</b>	<p><i>"During preps time, the anxiety level is high, so that's why they're working longer hours and getting more work done in a short time. They're basically more Productive."</i></p>
<b>Exam season survival mode: Peak productivity, but at what cost?</b>	<p><i>"In the last minute or near to the deadline, anxiety is so high, which can affect your mental health. And it has affected my mental health."</i></p> <p><i>"I keep thinking that if I hadn't procrastinated, this would not have happened. So yeah, it can affect your mental health."</i></p>
<b>The illusion of Efficiency: last-minute cramming</b>	<p><i>"I procrastinated a lot, and then in the end, I ended up getting a really good result, despite the fact that I didn't study the whole year."</i></p> <p><i>"In the end, you just end up quickly finishing your work without caring too much about the quality because you're short on time."</i></p>

#### Theme 5: Breaking the Cycle – What Works and What Doesn't

Students attempt various strategies to overcome procrastination, with mixed success. While some approaches, such as blocking distractions or self-imposed discipline, show mixed results, others—such as accountability through peers and small, consistent efforts—prove to be more effective.

Table 5: Subthemes and Representative Responses for Theme 5	
Subtheme	Representative Quotes
<b>Discipline</b>	<p><i>"Complete cut off from social media. That was the strategy, but that didn't work well."</i></p> <p><i>"I have tried locking all my accounts, using focus sessions on my laptop, but I have not found them to be working too effectively."</i></p> <p><i>"First and the most, in this era, I need to be able to get rid of my phone and my dopamine addiction. So, yeah, I feel like keeping my phone away and, switching off all the notifications and everything, that has played a good role."</i></p> <p><i>"Counselling can give you techniques. Counselling can give you a strategy. But it won't help if you're not disciplined enough."</i></p>
<b>The power of accountability</b>	<p><i>"I think telling someone else to hold you accountable is the only thing that's worked for me."</i></p> <p><i>"Surrounding yourself with people who are being productive definitely motivates you to do the same."</i></p>
<b>Small, consistent efforts: The secret weapon against procrastination</b>	<p><i>"You don't have to study whole chapters or whole books in one day. You should do a little. You should do so every single day. It's not as hard as you think it is."</i></p> <p><i>"Do a little bit every day and just remember, it's not as hard as it looks."</i></p> <p><i>"Consistency is the key."</i></p> <p><i>"If you increase that weightage, and give more power to the teacher, the faculty. That will drive students towards working hard and started working on time and avoid procrastination."</i></p>

## DISCUSSION

Academic procrastination is a prevalent issue among MBBS students and is affected by a combination of psychological, environmental, and structural factors. While procrastination is typically viewed as a basic issue with time management; however, our findings indicate that it is a complex behavioural pattern shaped by cognitive biases, emotional responses, and external stressors.

Students in our study demonstrated a paradoxical relationship with procrastination. It was common to hear everyone admit it was bad, but justify their actions, offering up a narrative of guilt, stress, and efficiency under pressure. This aligns with existing research, which suggests that procrastination is driven by a belief in enhanced performance when working under tight deadlines.<sup>9</sup> The cognitive bias that misattributes last-minute productivity to effectiveness further propagates procrastination habits.

Perfectionism was identified as a significant psychological trigger since students would

postpone tasks for the sake of getting the perfect conditions for work. This aligns with studies of perfectionism to avoidance behaviors in the academic domain.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, stress overload was found to be a key predictor of procrastination, supporting that perceptions of excessive academic pressure facilitate avoidance behavior.<sup>11</sup> In addition, lack of interest in certain subjects was widely reported, highlighting the role of intrinsic motivation in academic engagement.

The impact of digital distractions, especially social media and streaming services was also evident. Our findings align with previous studies suggesting that high screen time is associated with greater levels of procrastination.<sup>12</sup> Some students practiced "productive procrastination," doing non-essential but apparently helpful activities, delaying their academic work further.

Although a few students reported greater productivity under the pressure of deadlines, others had experienced last-minute study resulting in excessive anxiety and poor learning. This implies that while procrastination

can lead to short-term task completion, it eventually leads to stress and burnout.<sup>13</sup> The false sense of efficiency in approaching things at the last minute also perpetuates the procrastination habit, which becomes challenging to break.

Strategies to overcome procrastination were only partially successful. Most students found that self-discipline measures, like disconnecting from social media, had mixed results and often did not work, which suggests that self-control is not enough to eliminate procrastination. On the other hand, study plans and accountability among peers worked better, mirroring research focusing on the value of external accountability in minimizing procrastination.<sup>13</sup> Additionally, those students who followed small, habitual efforts over a period reported greater success in coping with procrastination affirming the efficacy of steady progress in accomplishing academic tasks. Encouraging the practice of reflective writing among medical students may also help them realize and overcome this phenomenon.<sup>14</sup>

Understanding the root causes of procrastination will enable medical educators to craft evidence-based interventions that counteract its effects. Introducing formal time management training, intrinsic motivation, and peer accountability can be useful strategies. Additionally, incorporating mindfulness and stress-reduction training into medical education can enable students to develop better coping skills. Systematically addressing these issues will allow institutions to build an environment that reduces procrastination and maximizes academic performance among medical students.

## CONCLUSION

Academic procrastination among MBBS students is a complex phenomenon determined by psychological, environmental, and structural variables. Although procrastination is sometimes seen as helpful by some students in boosting productivity at the last moment, it most commonly contributes to stress, anxiety, and poor mental health. Proven strategies like peer accountability, organized study plans, and consistency have been found to counter procrastination more effectively than self-discipline.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

There were no conflicts of interest

## DECLARATION

No grants or funding was availed by any authors for this research project.

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## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Author	Area of contribution
Naveed Afzal Khan	Idea conception, Design of the study, Data Analysis, and Drafting the Manuscript.
Nowshad Asim	Design of the study, Data Analysis and Manuscript Critical Appraisal.
Rameen Kamal	Data Collection, Data Analysis and Manuscript Critical Appraisal.
Hakeem Shah	Design of the study, and Manuscript Critical Appraisal.
Khurram Naushad	Data Analysis and Drafting the Manuscript.
Ibrar Mohibullah Wazir	Design of the study and Manuscript Critical Appraisal.

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