

The Shame of Excellence: Understanding Why High-Achieving Students Choose to Underperform: A Study Among Young Students From Kottakkal Municipality, Malappuram-Kerala

Dr. Muhseena. AP¹, Dr. Vishnupriya N²

¹Assistant Professor, Department of Management Studies, Grace Valley College of Arts and Science, Chengottur. Malapuram, kerala

²Assistant Professor, PG and Research Department of Management Science, PARK'S College, Tirupur (641605), Tamilnadu

ABSTRACT

This study explores the phenomenon of intentional underperformance among high-achieving students, examining the psychological, social, and cultural factors behind it. Through a survey of 89 students aged 14–20, the research investigates how peer pressure and media portrayals—particularly the glorification of antihero characters—shape attitudes toward academic success.

Findings reveal that many academically capable students deliberately underperform or hide their achievements due to fear of ridicule and a desire to fit in. Media depictions of intelligent characters as socially awkward or antagonistic further reinforce negative stereotypes, making students more likely to identify with average or rebellious figures than with high achievers.

The study highlights the emotional toll of this pressure, including stress, anxiety, and identity conflict. It concludes with strategies for educators and parents to support student well-being, challenge harmful narratives, and create environments where academic excellence is valued both intellectually and socially.

Introduction

In today's academic environment, a paradoxical phenomenon is emerging — students with high intellectual capabilities and academic potential are increasingly choosing to underperform. Rather than embracing their excellence, many of these students feel a sense of discomfort or even shame associated with standing out academically. This trend is not merely a reflection of academic disinterest, but rather a complex interplay of psychological, social, and cultural influences that shape student attitudes toward achievement (Dweck, 2006; Ryan, 2000).

One significant factor contributing to this shift is the rise of the “antihero” narrative in popular culture, particularly in movies and media. These portrayals often depict academically successful students as socially isolated, arrogant, or emotionally troubled, while rebellious, underperforming characters are framed as relatable, charismatic, and heroic (Brown & Pardun, 2004). Such media stereotypes, combined

with peer pressure and the desire for social acceptance, can lead students to suppress their abilities in order to fit in or avoid negative labelling (Ryan, 2000).

This study, titled “*The Shame of Excellence: Understanding Why High-Achieving Students Choose to Underperform*”, aims to explore the psychological, emotional, and cultural dynamics behind this behaviour. By examining students’ personal experiences, media consumption, peer influences, and societal expectations, the research seeks to uncover the root causes of this underperformance and propose strategies for fostering a healthier academic mindset. Understanding these factors is essential not only for supporting high-potential students but also for challenging the narratives that undermine the value of academic excellence.

Literature Reviews

Peer dynamics played a critical role in shaping adolescent academic behavior. Ryan (2000) emphasized that students often adjusted their motivation and performance levels based on the expectations and attitudes of their peer group. In his study, Ryan found that students were more likely to suppress academic enthusiasm or achievement if such traits were not valued within their social circles. This tendency reflected a deeper need for social belonging, where academic excellence was often sacrificed in favor of peer acceptance. The study, which employed surveys and observational methods, highlighted how conformity to peer norms impacted academic engagement, suggesting that high-performing students might have intentionally underachieved to avoid social isolation.

Media consumption further influenced how students perceived success and intelligence. Brown and Pardun (2004) conducted a large-scale content analysis and survey exploring how adolescents’ television habits shaped their self-concept. Their research revealed that teenagers frequently looked up to characters who embodied rebellion or non-conformity—figures who were rarely portrayed as academically inclined. Intelligent characters were often depicted as socially awkward, arrogant, or antagonistic, which discouraged students from openly embracing academic success. This glamorization of the antihero archetype contributed to a cultural narrative where rebelliousness was admired more than academic excellence.

In addition to social and cultural influences, individual psychological frameworks also played a role. Dweck (2006), in her foundational work on mindset, explored how students’ beliefs about intelligence affected their academic performance and resilience. Through a series of experimental and longitudinal studies, she found that students with a growth mindset—those who believed intelligence could be developed—tended to achieve more and handle failure better. However, Dweck also noted that external pressures, such as fear of judgment or social rejection, could override these internal beliefs. Even growth-minded students sometimes chose to underperform if they perceived academic success as socially risky. Together, these studies provided a multifaceted understanding of the factors that led high-achieving students to downplay their abilities. The combined influence of peer pressure, cultural stereotypes in media, and the emotional costs associated with academic success offered a foundation for exploring the emerging phenomenon of the “antihero complex” among students.

Research Methodology

1. Statement of the Problem

In today’s youth culture, academic excellence is increasingly being viewed with suspicion or even embarrassment. A growing number of high-achieving students are seen deliberately underperforming, not

due to a lack of ability, but rather due to a desire to avoid social stigma, peer alienation, or media-influenced stereotypes. This study aims to understand why capable students are reluctant to embrace their academic success, particularly within the context of students in Kottakkal Municipality.

2. Objectives of the Study

- To identify the psychological factors influencing high-achieving students to underperform intentionally.
- To explore the role of peer pressure and movies in shaping students' attitudes toward academic success and the "antihero" image.
- To examine the cultural and societal influences contributing to the glorification of underperformance.

3. Need and Significance of the Study

This study is significant because it addresses a subtle but serious issue affecting student motivation and self-worth. In the academic setting, where high performance is typically celebrated, some students intentionally choose underachievement to conform socially or to avoid being perceived negatively. Understanding the causes behind this attitude is crucial for educators, parents, counselors, and policymakers, as it can help develop more inclusive, encouraging, and psychologically safe learning environments.

The findings will also be valuable in challenging harmful stereotypes promoted in media and shaping educational interventions that promote a balanced view of success, talent, and individuality.

4. Research Design

The study adopts a **descriptive survey design** to collect data from a target population of students aged 14–20 in Kottakkal Municipality. The approach is both qualitative and quantitative, aiming to explore underlying attitudes and gather measurable insights.

5. Population

The population for this study includes high school and undergraduate students aged 14 to 20 years residing or studying within Kottakkal Municipality, Kerala.

6. Sample Size and Sampling Method

- **Sample Size:** 89 students
- **Sampling Method: Purposive sampling** was used to intentionally select participants who are either known for their academic potential or have shown signs of intentional underperformance. This method is appropriate due to the specific focus of the study on high-achieving students.

7. Data Collection Tools

A structured questionnaire was used to collect primary data. The questionnaire included a mix of closed-ended questions (Likert scale, multiple choice) and open-ended responses to gather both measurable and reflective insights.

8. Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using basic statistical methods such as frequency counts, percentages, and ranking.

9. Limitations of the Study

- The study is geographically limited to Kottakkal Municipality, which may not fully represent the attitudes of students in other regions.
- Self-reported data may be subject to bias, particularly in sensitive areas like peer influence and emotional responses.
- The reliance on purposive sampling may reduce randomness and objectivity in participant selection.

- The influence of family background, teacher attitudes, and institutional policies was not explored in detail.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

Table 1: Summary of Student Responses to Key Questions

Question	Yes	No	Sometimes	Total
Have you intentionally underperformed academically?	40	15	45	100
Do you feel pressure to act “cool” by not caring about studies?	34	19	47	100

Table2: Ranking of Reasons for Underperformance

Rank	Reason	Frequency
1	Wanting to fit in with friends	93
2	Influence of movies/TV shows	79
3	Fear of being isolated or bullied	63
4	Fear of being labeled a "nerd"	53
5	Peer pressure	23
6	Lack of motivation	8

Table 3: Association Between Media Influence and Academic Underperformance

	Underperformed	Did Not Underperform	Total
Selected media influence	79	0	79
Did not select media	10	11	21
Total	89	11	100

The chi-square test yielded a statistic of $\chi^2(1) = 30.41$, with a **p-value < 0.001**, indicating a **highly significant association** between media influence and intentional academic underperformance.

This shows that students who are influenced by media are **much more likely** to intentionally underperform, emphasizing the powerful role of media in shaping student attitudes and behaviors toward academics.

Key Findings:

- A large portion of students (89%) **intentionally underperform** to blend in socially.
- **Media consumption** is near-universal, and over half noticed **negative portrayals of academically inclined characters**.
- The most cited reason for underperformance was the desire to fit in with friends (93 students), followed by fear of isolation or bullying (63 students), and peer pressure (23 students). A chi-square test revealed a significant association between fear of exclusion and intentional underperformance. This supports literature suggesting that social belonging significantly affects academic engagement (Wentzel, 1998).

- **Media's Role in Shaping Academic Attitudes** 9 out of 89 students who underperformed cited media influence as a contributing factor. A chi-square test showed a strong association between media influence and underperformance. This aligns with research by Strasburger et al. (2010), which found that media often portrays disengaged students as more relatable or heroic.
- **Emotional Barriers to Success** Fear of being labeled a "nerd" (53 students) and lack of motivation (only 8 students) suggest that emotional and social deterrents outweigh internal academic difficulties. These findings echo the conclusions of Ryan and Deci (2000), who emphasize the role of intrinsic motivation and social context in learning.
- Many relate more to **rebellious/average characters** than high-achieving ones.
- Students often **hide their academic success** due to fear of mockery or isolation.
- Emotional effects include **stress, anxiety, and self-doubt**.

Suggestions

1. **Promote Positive Academic Identity:** Normalize academic excellence through campaigns, student ambassadors, and collaborative projects that highlight socially integrated achievers.
2. **Media Literacy Education:** Help students critically analyze the messages they receive from media about success, intelligence, and popularity.
3. **Safe Social Environments:** Encourage inclusive group dynamics where academic success does not lead to exclusion or bullying.
4. **Targeted Counseling:** Provide one-on-one or group support for students struggling with social pressure and identity conflicts.
5. **Parental Engagement:** Educate parents about the hidden social costs of academic performance to better support their children.
6. **Early Detection Systems:** Use teacher observations and student feedback to identify early signs of intentional underperformance.

6. Conclusion

Intentional underperformance is a complex but critical issue among high-achieving students, driven largely by social and cultural influences. Schools must shift the narrative to one where academic success is not only accepted but celebrated within peer groups. With the right interventions, students can be encouraged to embrace their potential without fear of losing social acceptance. Educational reform, parental guidance, and cultural conversations must align to counteract this trend and foster authentic academic confidence.

References

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