

The Psychological Impact of Examination Paper Leaks on Students and Aspirants

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Abstract

Examination paper leaks are not only threats to examination security and academic integrity but can also have serious psychological consequences for students and competitive-examination aspirants. This paper examines their potential effects on anxiety, perceived fairness, academic motivation, institutional trust, self-efficacy and psychological well-being. Drawing on literature on test anxiety and academic stress, it proposes that paper leaks increase uncertainty and perceived injustice, leading to worry, emotional stress, reduced concentration and motivation. The study also highlights the indirect effects of rumours, social media, re-examination uncertainty and financial burden. It recommends transparent communication, fair remedial procedures, counselling support and stronger examination-security measures. The paper concludes that further empirical research is required to measure the long-term psychological impact of examination paper leaks.

Keywords: Examination paper leak; test anxiety; academic stress; psychological well-being; perceived injustice; examination integrity; students; competitive aspirants; institutional trust.

1. Introduction

Examinations are high-stakes evaluative events that influence progression, admission, scholarships, employment and professional opportunities. For many students and competitive-examination aspirants, months or years of preparation are organised around a single examination window. Consequently, the discovery or credible reporting of an examination paper leak can be experienced not merely as an administrative irregularity but as a threat to the meaning and fairness of the entire evaluative process.

Research on test anxiety provides an important foundation for understanding this problem. A 30-year meta-analytic review covering 238 studies found that test anxiety was negatively related to several educational performance outcomes, including standardised tests, university entrance examinations and grade-point average; perceived difficulty and high-stakes consequences were also related to higher test anxiety. A separate meta-analysis of 44 randomised controlled trials involving 2,209 university students found that interventions could reduce test anxiety and improve academic performance.

The Indian context makes the issue especially important because academic competition and examination pressure can be substantial. A 2024 Indian study of 570 adolescents preparing for competitive entrance examinations reported high academic stress in 86.0% of participants, high perceived parental pressure in 87.0%, moderately high anxiety in 28.5%, and low general well-being in 57.7%.

Against this background, a paper leak may amplify an already stressful environment by introducing uncertainty, perceived unfairness and loss of control. The present paper therefore focuses on the psychological dimension of examination-paper leaks and develops an evidence-informed framework for understanding and responding to their consequences.

2. Problem Statement

When an examination paper is leaked, students who prepared legitimately may perceive that their effort has been devalued and that the outcome is no longer determined solely by knowledge, preparation and performance. Even when authorities cancel or reschedule an examination, uncertainty about the next procedure can prolong stress. Students may also compare themselves with peers who are suspected of having accessed leaked material, increasing feelings of injustice, anger and helplessness. The central research problem is therefore: how can an examination-paper leak influence the psychological well-being, academic behaviour and institutional trust of students and aspirants, and what measures can reduce these effects?

3. Objectives of the Study

- a)** To examine the likely psychological effects of examination paper leaks on students and competitive-examination aspirants.
- b)** To analyse the relationship between examination uncertainty, perceived unfairness and test-related anxiety.
- c)** To examine possible effects on academic motivation, concentration, self-efficacy and trust in examination institutions.
- d)** To identify indirect stressors such as rumours, social-media exposure, re-examination uncertainty, financial burden and peer comparison.
- e)** To propose institutional and psychological interventions for reducing harm after a paper-leak incident.
- f)** To identify research gaps and propose directions for future empirical studies.

4. Research Questions

- a) RQ1:** What psychological responses are most likely to occur among legitimate students after an examination paper leak?
- b) RQ2:** How might perceived unfairness and loss of control influence examination anxiety and academic motivation?

- c) **RQ3:** How can a paper leak affect students' trust in examination authorities and the perceived legitimacy of results?
- d) **RQ4:** Which institutional responses are likely to reduce uncertainty and psychological distress?
- e) **RQ5:** What methodological approaches should future researchers use to empirically measure the impact of examination paper leaks?

5. Methodology

This paper adopts a conceptual, evidence-informed research design based on a structured narrative synthesis of peer-reviewed literature concerning test anxiety, academic stress, examination-related well-being and high-stakes assessment. The analysis does not claim to estimate a causal effect size for paper leaks themselves because direct empirical literature specifically measuring the psychological impact of examination-paper leakage remains limited. Instead, established evidence on examination anxiety and academic stress is used to construct a theoretically grounded framework for understanding the likely pathways through which a leak can affect students.

The literature base includes systematic reviews, meta-analyses and Indian empirical studies. Particular emphasis is placed on studies that examine high-stakes testing, anxiety, academic performance, competitive examinations and psychological well-being. The paper follows a cautious interpretive approach: conclusions about paper leaks are presented as conceptual propositions requiring direct empirical validation rather than as unsupported causal claims.

6. Literature Review

• Test Anxiety and Academic Performance

von der Embse et al. (2018) conducted a 30-year meta-analytic review covering **238 studies** on test anxiety. The study found that test anxiety was negatively associated with educational performance, while perceived examination difficulty and the consequences attached to examinations were associated with higher levels of anxiety. These findings are particularly relevant to examination paper leaks because such incidents can increase students' perception that the examination is high-stakes and unfair, potentially intensifying anxiety and affecting academic performance.

• Test Anxiety and Psychological Interventions

Huntley et al. (2019) conducted a meta-analysis of **44 randomised controlled trials involving 2,209 university students** experiencing test anxiety. The findings showed that psychological and behavioural interventions significantly reduced test anxiety and were also associated with improved academic performance. The study highlights the importance of providing psychological support to students experiencing examination-related distress. This is particularly relevant following examination paper leaks, when uncertainty and repeated examinations may increase psychological pressure.

• Academic Stress and Anxiety among Adolescents in India

Trevethan et al. (2022) examined the relationship between academic stress and anxiety symptoms among **282 adolescents in India** over a five-month period. The study found that academic stress directly contributed to changes in symptoms of generalised anxiety and panic, with physiological hyperarousal acting as a potential mechanism. The findings demonstrate that prolonged academic pressure can have measurable psychological consequences and provide a useful basis for examining how examination disruptions may intensify anxiety among students and aspirants.

• Competitive Examination Stress and Student Well-Being in India

Pienyu, Margaret and D'Souza (2024) studied **570 adolescents preparing for competitive entrance examinations in Karnataka, India**. The study reported high academic stress among 86% of participants, high perceived parental pressure among 87%, moderately high anxiety among 28.5%, and low general well-being among 57.7%. The findings demonstrate the substantial psychological pressure already experienced by competitive-examination aspirants. A paper leak or examination cancellation may add further uncertainty and perceived unfairness to this existing pressure.

• Examination Stress, Anxiety and Insomnia among Medical Examination Candidates

A recent Indian cross-sectional study of **80 foreign medical graduates preparing for the FMGE** examined depression, anxiety, stress and insomnia. The study reported high levels of depression, anxiety, stress and insomnia among participants and found relationships between stress, anxiety, depression and sleep difficulties. It also identified peer comparison and repeated examination attempts as important stress-related factors. These findings are relevant to examination paper leaks because re-examinations, uncertainty and comparison with other candidates may similarly contribute to psychological distress.

Research Gap

The above literature establishes a strong relationship between **examination pressure, anxiety, academic stress and psychological well-being**. However, most existing studies focus on general examination stress or test anxiety rather than the **specific psychological consequences of examination paper leaks**. Therefore, there is a need for empirical research examining how perceived unfairness, loss of trust, uncertainty, re-examination, social-media rumours and disruption of academic preparation affect students and competitive-examination aspirants.

MAJOR EXAMINATION INCIDENTS & IRREGULARITIES IN INDIA						
A Chronological Analytical Overview of Key National & State Exam Incidents (1992 – 2026)						
TOTAL DOCUMENTED CASES 29 Major Events		TIMELINE SPAN 34+ Years		PEAK SINGLE INCIDENT SCALE ~1.15 Crore		KEY OVERSIGHT BODIES NTA, CBSE, State PSCs
#	Year	Examination	Level	Conducting Body	Candidates Affected	Action Taken
1	1992	Bihar Intermediate Board	State Board	BSEB	~6 Lakh	Exams cancelled in affected centres
2	1998	Bihar Public Service Commission	Recruitment	BPSC	~40,000	Investigation
3	2000	Maharashtra Engineering CET	State Entrance	DTE Maharashtra	~1 Lakh	Security review
4	2004	TYBCom Examination	University	Univ. of Mumbai	~60,000	Exams cancelled beta; re-exam
5	2004	AIPMT (security controversy)	National Entrance	CBSE	~2 Lakh	Investigation
6	2006	Haryana Teacher Recruitment	Recruitment	Haryana Govt.	~80,000	Investigation
7	2006	Punjab Public Service Recruitment	Recruitment	PPSC	~25,000	Investigation
8	2010	Haryana PMT	State Entrance	Haryana	~40,000	Investigation
9	2013	MP PMT (Vyapam Scam)	Prof. Entrance	MPPEB	~41,000	ScT, CBI investigation
10	2015	AIPMT	National Entrance	CBSE	~6.3 Lakh	Supreme Court ordered re-exam
11	2017-18	SSC CGL	National Recruitment	SSC	~30 Lakh	CBI inquiry
12	2018	CBSE Class XII Economics	National Board	CBSE	~2.8 Lakh	Re-examination
13	2018	CBSE Class X Mathematics	National Board	CBSE	~16 Lakh	No nationwide re-exam
14	2019	Rajasthan Police Recruitment	Recruitment	Rajasthan Police	~15 Lakh	Investigation
15	2020	JEE Main (solver racket cases)	National Entrance	NTA	~8 Lakh	Cybercrime Investigation
16	2021	UPPET	Teacher Eligibility	Uttar Pradesh	~21 Lakh	Exam cancelled
17	2021	REET	Teacher Eligibility	Rajasthan	~15.5 Lakh	Exam cancelled & re-conducted
18	2022	Gujarat Head Clerk	Recruitment	Gujarat	~48,000	Exam cancelled
19	2022	Railway Group-D	National Recruitment	RRB	~1.15 Crore	Investigation into irregularities
20	2022	MP Police Constable	Recruitment	MPESB	~8 Lakh	Investigation
21	2022	Bihar Constable Recruitment	Recruitment	CSBC Bihar	~8 Lakh	Investigation
22	2023	OSSSC BIHAR/AMIN	Recruitment	OSSSC	~5.4 Lakh	Examination cancelled
23	2023	Bihar Teacher Recruitment (TRB)	Recruitment	BPSC	~8.5 Lakh	Investigation into allegations
24	2024	UGC-NET	National Eligibility	NTA	~8 Lakh	Examination cancelled
25	2024	REET-UG	National Entrance	NTA	~24 Lakh	CBI investigation
26	2024	CSIR-UGC NET	National	NTA	~2.3 Lakh	Rescheduled
27	2025	UPPSC RO/ARO	Recruitment	UPPSC	~10.7 Lakh	Re-examination ordered
28	2026	Mumbai University TYBCom	University	Univ. of Mumbai	~55k-60k	CID probe sought
29	2026	NEET-UG	National Entrance	NTA	~22 Lakh	Charge sheets filed; CBI probe
30	2026	UGC NET	National Eligibility	NTA	Over 157,000 students	Affected Subjects: English, Commerce, and Sociology Retest Dates: September 9 and 10, 2026 (announced via Hindustan Times)

7. Psychological Impact Framework

a) Anxiety and Worry

- Students may constantly worry about whether the examination will be cancelled, postponed, or conducted again.
- Uncertainty about the examination process can create fear and emotional tension.
- High-stakes examinations combined with uncertainty can significantly increase examination-related anxiety.

b) Perceived Injustice and Anger

- Students may feel that their honest preparation and hard work have been undermined.
- They may become angry toward authorities, institutions, or individuals responsible for the leak.
- Feelings of frustration and injustice can consume mental energy that could otherwise be used for study and recovery.

c) Loss of Motivation and Self-Efficacy

- Students may lose motivation when they believe that success depends on leaked information rather than genuine preparation.
- Their confidence in their own academic abilities may decrease.
- Repeated disruptions may make students feel that their efforts will not necessarily lead to positive outcomes.

d) Concentration, Sleep and Physical Stress Responses

- Uncertainty and repetitive thoughts about the examination can interfere with concentration and memory.
- Students may experience sleep disturbances because of worry and examination-related stress.
- Prolonged stress can contribute to fatigue, anxiety, and other physical or emotional symptoms.

e) Peer Comparison and Social Conflict

- Students may compare themselves with peers who are suspected of having benefited from leaked papers.
- Such comparisons can create feelings of inferiority, resentment, or distrust.
- Online discussions and social-media conversations can further amplify comparisons and expose students to distressing information.

f) Institutional Trust and Legitimacy

- Paper leaks can reduce students' confidence in the examination and education system.
- Students may begin to question the fairness and transparency of assessment procedures.
- Continued incidents can damage the perceived credibility and legitimacy of educational authorities.

g) Intermediate Psychological Consequences

The above experiences may collectively result in:

- Emotional distress – anxiety, anger, fear, and frustration.
- Reduced academic engagement – decreased interest and participation in studies.
- Impaired cognitive functioning – difficulty concentrating, remembering, and making decisions.
- Physical strain and fatigue – sleep problems, exhaustion, and stress-related symptoms.
- Social withdrawal and conflict – isolation, arguments, resentment, and reduced social interaction.
- Erosion of trust and confidence – reduced faith in institutions and examination authorities.

h) Long-Term Impact

If such experiences are repeated or remain unresolved, they may contribute to:

- Poor psychological well-being
- Academic underachievement
- Disengagement from studies
- Loss of confidence
- Reduced trust in educational institutions and examination systems

Overall: An examination paper leak is not merely an academic irregularity. It can create a chain of psychological effects that begins with anxiety and perceived injustice and may ultimately lead to reduced academic engagement, poor well-being, and loss of trust in the education system.

8. Recent Student Protests and the Demand for Examination Reform

The recent student-led protests associated with the Cockroach Janata Party (CJP) movement at Jantar Mantar, New Delhi, have brought examination paper leaks and the concerns of students and aspirants into wider public discussion. The agitation was linked to demands concerning the NEET paper leak, student welfare, accountability, and reforms in the examination system. Such protests demonstrate that examination irregularities can extend beyond academic concerns and become significant sources of emotional distress, frustration, and perceived injustice among young people. For students who invest considerable time, money, and effort in competitive examinations, allegations of paper leakage may create feelings of helplessness, insecurity, anger, and loss of trust in the fairness of the system.

These concerns are particularly relevant when considering **Generation Alpha (Gen Alpha)** students, who have grown up in a highly digital and information-driven environment. Continuous exposure to examination-related news, social-media discussions, videos, and online debates can intensify their awareness of examination controversies and may contribute to information overload, anxiety, fear of failure, and difficulty concentrating on academic preparation. For younger students, repeated reports of examination cancellations, paper leaks, re-examinations, and perceived unfairness may weaken their confidence in educational institutions and create uncertainty about their academic future. Social-media comparisons can further increase feelings of inadequacy and emotional pressure, particularly when students perceive that others may have received an unfair advantage. The psychological impact may therefore include **anxiety, academic stress, reduced motivation, loss of self-efficacy, sleep disturbance, emotional frustration, social withdrawal, and erosion of institutional trust**. The continuation of public mobilisation, including indications of a renewed phase of the Jantar Mantar campaign, further reflects the importance of addressing not only examination integrity and accountability but also the **psychological well-being and digital-era vulnerabilities of younger generations of students**.

9. Institutional Recommendations

Rapid and transparent communication: Authorities should communicate confirmed facts, decisions and timelines promptly.

Single official information channel: A clearly identified official channel should reduce confusion created by rumours and conflicting messages.

Psychological first response: Institutions should provide counselling access and supportive communication immediately after a major examination disruption.

Predictable remedial procedures: Cancellation, re-examination and result-related procedures should be communicated with clear criteria and timelines.

Academic continuity: Students should receive reasonable preparation support if an examination is rescheduled.

Protection of student interests: Administrative decisions should consider travel, accommodation, coaching and other costs imposed by re-examination.

Independent investigation: Security failures should be investigated through credible procedures so that students perceive accountability.

Preventive examination security: Strong access controls, secure printing and digital handling, chain-of-custody procedures, monitoring and staff accountability should be strengthened.

Post-incident review: Authorities should conduct a structured review covering both security failures

10. Role of Teachers and Parents

Teachers and parents play a crucial role in reducing the psychological and academic impact of examination paper leaks on students and competitive-examination aspirants.

Role of Teachers

Teachers should act as a reliable source of information and emotional support. They should acknowledge students' frustration and concerns while avoiding the circulation of unverified information, rumours or exaggerated claims. Clear communication regarding examination schedules, re-examinations, official announcements and academic alternatives can reduce uncertainty among students.

Teachers should also encourage students to focus on aspects that remain within their control, such as preparation, revision, time management and maintaining healthy study routines. Where re-examinations are announced, teachers can provide structured revision plans, additional academic guidance and reasonable flexibility to help students restart their preparation without feeling overwhelmed.

Another important responsibility of teachers is to identify students showing signs of excessive stress, withdrawal, loss of motivation, sleep difficulties or persistent anxiety. Such students may be encouraged to approach counsellors or appropriate support services. Teachers should create a classroom environment in which students can express their concerns without fear of being judged.

Role of Parents

Parents can significantly influence how students respond to examination-related crises. Instead of blaming students for their performance or repeatedly asking about ranks and marks, parents should provide emotional reassurance and recognise the effort already invested by the student. Supportive communication can help students regain confidence after an examination disruption.

Parents should avoid comparing their children with peers who may have benefited from leaked material or other unfair advantages. Such comparisons can increase feelings of inadequacy, anger and helplessness. Instead, parents should emphasise that examination irregularities are circumstances beyond the student's control and that their worth should not be determined solely by examination results.

Parents should also encourage healthy routines involving adequate sleep, nutritious food, physical activity, relaxation and appropriate study breaks. Excessive pressure to compensate for lost preparation time may further increase stress and reduce concentration.

11. Conclusion

Examination paper leaks should be understood not only as violations of examination security but also as potential psychological stressors. The established literature on test anxiety and academic stress shows that high-stakes assessment can produce substantial anxiety and that anxiety is associated with poorer

educational outcomes. Indian evidence further demonstrates the considerable burden of examination-related stress among adolescents and competitive-examination candidates.

A paper leak can add a distinctive layer of uncertainty and perceived injustice to this existing pressure. Students may question whether their preparation still has value, whether the assessment is fair and whether institutions can protect their interests. The most important institutional response is therefore twofold: restore examination integrity and restore psychological predictability. Transparent communication, credible investigation, fair remedial procedures, counselling and academic support can help reduce uncertainty and rebuild trust.

The topic merits systematic empirical investigation. A rigorous future research programme should measure psychological outcomes directly, distinguish confirmed leaks from rumours and examine how institutional response moderates student distress. Protecting the integrity of examinations ultimately means protecting not only the validity of results but also the confidence and well-being of the students whose futures depend upon them.

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