

ACHIEVEMENT MOTIVATION AND PERCEIVED STRESS AMONG GEN Z MBA STUDENTS IN MUMBAI: THE MODERATING ROLE OF LOCUS OF CONTROL

Jauzinah Danesh Borzu¹

PHD Student, SIES College of Management Studies, Nerul

Dr. Rajesh Chouksey²

Professor, SIES College of Management Studies, Nerul

<https://doie.org/10.65985/APER.2026596579>

1. Abstract

This research paper investigates the relationship between achievement motivation, perceived stress, and locus of control (LoC) among Generation Z (Gen Z) Management (MBA) students in Mumbai. This study evaluates three primary hypotheses viz. the positive correlation between achievement motivation and perceived stress (H1); the predictive power of internal LoC in reducing perceived stress which acts as a psychological buffer (H2); and the role of LoC as a moderator in the relationship between achievement motivation and perceived stress (H3). For this research we have utilized a quantitative research methodology and data was collected from a sample of 200 Gen Z management students from 3 management institutes in Mumbai using the Rotter Internal-External Locus of Control Scale, the Deo-Mohan Achievement Motivation Scale, and the Perceived Stress Scale using an online survey form (Deo & Mohan, 1985; Rotter, 1966; Cohen et al., 1983). The results of the research confirm that while high achievement motivation often intensifies stress in Mumbai's competitive environment, an internal locus of control significantly weakens this negative relationship by fostering a sense of personal agency (Rajagopal & Sivaranjani, 2025). The findings offer critical implications for business schools to integrate resilience-based coaching and stress management strategies into the curriculum to support the next generation of high-achieving leaders (Elizabeth Chacko et al., 2023).

Keywords: Achievement Motivation, Locus of Control, Perceived Stress, Generation Z, MBA Students, Mumbai

2. Introduction

The current higher education landscape in India is defined by the entrance of Generation Z into postgraduate management programs (Aggarwal et al., 2022). Gen Zs are born between 1997 and the early 2010s, this cohort is characterized by a "truly digital" lifestyle and a pragmatic, ROI-focused approach to career development (Williams, 2015; GMAC, 2023). In the financial capital of Mumbai, these students operate within a hyper-competitive environment where corporate placements and high Cost-to-Company (CTC) offers are viewed as the primary metrics of success (Gaikwad & Bhattacharya, 2024). However, this relentless pursuit of excellence is often accompanied by unprecedented levels of psychological distress and academic burnout (Sinha & Sonawane, 2024; Laeequddin et al., 2024).

Achievement motivation serves as the fundamental impetus that drives these students toward their professional goals (McClelland, 1961). According to research, while high levels of motivation are an essential factor for academic persistence, but recent literature has found that the extreme pressure to outperform peers in Mumbai's business schools may lead to a

significant increase in perceived stress as well (Saharia & Goswami, 2021; Gaikwad & Bhattacharya, 2024). Perceived stress is defined as the degree to which individuals find their lives unpredictable, uncontrollable, and overloaded (Cohen et al., 1983). Especially in a city like Mumbai where environmental stressors like daily local train commuting already depletes a student's mental energy, add to that the increased cognitive load of competitive academic performance can become extremely overwhelming for students (Lakhani, 2024; Tiwale, 2025).

In order to understand how students navigate this strain and what is the differentiating factor that helps some students be less stressed compared to others in these situations, it is critical to examine the "locus of control" (LoC) of the students. Locus of Control is a construct from Rotter's Social Learning Theory (Rotter, 1966) and according to Rotter Locus of Control is of two types viz. Internal Locus of control and External Locus of Control. Internal Locus of Control individuals believe that their own efforts and skills are the primary determinants of their success, whereas those with an external orientation attribute outcomes to fate, luck, or powerful others (Rotter, 1966; Arellano Villa & Sebastian, 2021). This research paper argues that an internal LoC not only predicts lower baseline stress but also acts as a crucial moderator that helps students channel their achievement motivation into productive growth rather than debilitating anxiety (Abouserie, 1994; Ibrahim & Elsabahy, 2020).

3. Literature Review and Research Gap

3.1. The Dual nature of Achievement Motivation and Perceived Stress

Achievement motivation can be defined as the learned drive to excel and achieve challenging goals (McClelland, 1961). In general this drive is positively associated with grade point averages (GPA) and career progression, but often it carries a high psychological cost especially in high-pressure settings (Daumiller & Zarrinabadi, 2021). Students that have high achievement needs often set lofty and highly aspirational objectives and put forth significant effort; but this can lead to emotional exhaustion and burnout among them when the resources to fulfil these objectives are insufficient (Sarwer et al., 2024; Hillert et al., 2020). Research on Indian nursing and management students found that although motivation did act as a mobilizing resource encouraging students to take action, but highly motivated individuals were also more likely to be stressed and be less satisfied with their study-life balance. This suggests that the relationship between motivation and stress is not always linear but it is also influenced by the intensity of the competitive environment of the students (Gaikwad & Bhattacharya, 2024).

3.2. Locus of Control : The Psychological Buffer

The concept of a "psychological buffer" can be defined as a trait that protects an individual from the negative effects of something eg. stress. One such psychological buffer is internal locus of control, this is because an internal locus of control provides a sense of mastery and responsibility over academic outcomes (Rajagopal & Sivaranjani, 2025). Individuals with an internal locus of control are found to be more confident in handling academic challenges and tend to use more effective emotional regulation strategies (Khonya et al., 2022). In contrast, an individuals with an external LoC are consistently linked to experience higher stress, learned helplessness, and mood disturbances (Abouserie, 1994; Roddenberry & Renk, 2010). Research done on students of Indian Universities confirmed that academic stress showed a significant negative correlation with LoC, thereby meaning that individual who feel in control are likely to experience less perceived strain (Kulkarni et al., 2025).

In research a moderation is said to occur when the relationship between two variables depends on the level of a third variable. In this research, we have hypothesized that Locus of Control will moderate the path between achievement motivation and perceived stress (H3). Evidence from studies done on accounting firms found that the more internal an individual's LoC, the more they perceive stress as a stimulant for achievement rather than a threat. Which means that for students who have a dominant internal LoC, high motivation may lead to "eustress" or beneficial arousal, whereas for individuals with an external LoC, the same achievement motivation may result in debilitating anxiety (Pascoe et al., 2019; Kahn et al., 2023). Therefore this moderation of LoC which we have studied in this research paper is critical especially during Mumbai's highly competitive placement season. Therefore, when students attribute their success to "powerful others" (eg. recruiters) may feel more stressed by their own high expectations than those who trust their own skills (Laequddin et al., 2024).

3.3. The Mumbai Hustle and Gen Z Identity

Mumbai being the city of dreams and filled with constant hustle and bustle, modern and dense infrastructure and "burnout culture" provides a unique backdrop for any psychological study to be conducted (Tiwale, 2025). Most students have to commute daily via the local trains which serves as a constant physical trial that drains the student's capacity to cope with academic demands (Lakhani, 2024). It was found that approximately 40% of Mumbai students experience negative academic outcomes due to commute length and overcrowding (Lakhani, 2024). Furthermore, Gen Z students were found to be most likely to experience "Fear of Missing Out" (FoMO) and digital anxiety, which in turn can shift their locus of control toward the external end since they constantly compare themselves to peers on social media (Lindner, 2023a; Jabeen et al., 2023).

3.4. Research Gap

Till now these variables have been studied individually to a great extent but there is a lack of contemporary research that investigates the moderating role of LoC on the relationship between achievement motivation & perceived stress specifically for Gen Z MBA students in Mumbai (Singh et al., 2020). Most existing studies on achievement motivation in India are dated or have focussed on high school populations (Bhargava, 1983; Deo & Mohan, 1985). There is also a distinct need to understand how urban environmental stressors and digital co-dependency (AI and social media) modify the traditional "buffering" effect of internal control (Lee & Jang, 2025; Stamatiadis, 2025) especially in case of Gen Z. Therefore, this study addresses these gaps by offering an integrated moderation model to study especially in Mumbai's high-stakes management ecosystem (Laequddin et al., 2024).

4. Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study is grounded in Rotter's Social Learning Theory and the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping (Rotter, 1966; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). In this study our model positions Achievement Motivation as the independent variable (IV) that drives behavioural effort, while Perceived Stress is the dependent variable (DV) which represents the student's psychological response (Rücker, 2012). Also in our model, Locus of Control acts as both a predictor of stress (buffer) and a moderator between the IV-DV relationship.

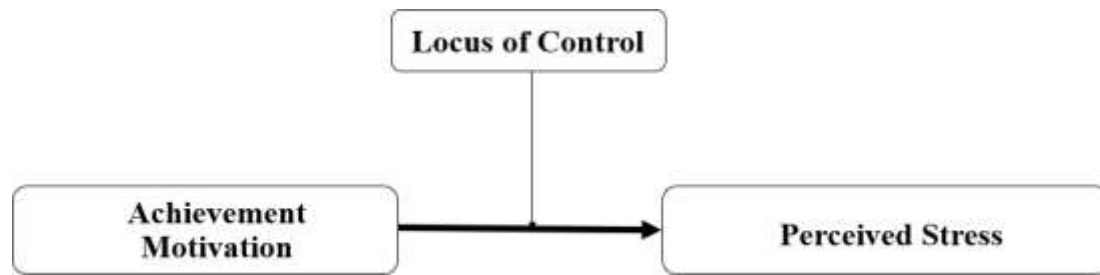


Figure 1 : Conceptual Framework

- **Independent Variable:** Achievement Motivation (Need for excellence and challenging goals) (McClelland, 1961).
- **Dependent Variable:** Perceived Stress (Degree of uncontrollability and overload) (Cohen et al., 1983).
- **Moderator:** Locus of Control (Internal vs. External) (Rotter, 1966).
- **Outcome relationships:** Achievement Motivation leads to Stress (H1); Internal LoC reduces Stress (H2); LoC alters the impact of Achievement Motivation on Stress (H3).

5. Hypothesis Development

H1: Higher levels of achievement motivation are positively and significantly associated with higher levels of perceived stress among Gen Z MBA students in Mumbai.

Theoretical support for this hypothesis suggests that the drive to excel causes individuals to set extremely high standards, which in turn can become a primary source of stress especially in highly competitive environments. According to past research, empirical data from Indian competitive exam aspirants has shown that higher motivation levels among students are linked to better performance but it also leads to increased stress and burnout during high-pressure periods (Sharma & Singh, 2018).

H2: Internal locus of control significantly predicts lower perceived stress levels among Gen Z MBA students, acting as a psychological buffer.

Individuals who believe they have control over their circumstances typically feel freer and less stressed by external events. Past research has confirmed that internal locus of control is a strong factor for predicting academic achievement and mental health of the individual; this is because according to research internals attribute success to their own effort and plan for improvement rather than panic under pressure (Suraj et al., 2024; SimplyPsychology, 2025).

H3: Locus of control significantly moderates the relationship between achievement motivation and perceived stress among Gen Z MBA students.

This hypothesis proposes that the "stress cost" of high motivation is significantly lower for students with an internal LoC compared to those with an external LoC. Students with an internal LoC perceive their academic burdens as something they can manage, whereas motivated students with an external orientation feel trapped by external standards that they cannot influence, therefore leading to extreme distress (Kahn et al., 2023; Rashid, 2013).

6. Research Methodology and Data Collection

This study adopts a positivist, quantitative, descriptive, and correlational research design to study the relationship between Achievement Motivation and Perceived Stress and the

moderating effect of Locus of Control.

For the purpose of our research our population comprised of Gen Z management students pursuing an MBA / MMS degree from management institutes in Mumbai. In our research Gen Z refers to individuals born in or after 1997. In this research, a convenience sampling technique was used in order to select a sample of 200 MBA students from 3 management institutes in Mumbai. The sample was balanced across specializations and academic years to ensure broad representativeness with 80 students from finance, 70 students from Marketing and 50 students from Human Resources specializations (Laequddin et al., 2024). Participants were aged 21–27, representing the core Gen Z demographic (Sinha & Sonawane, 2024).

Data were collected via an online survey platform to ensure anonymity and a high response rate (Arora, 2024). Surveys were distributed during the peak placement season (October–November) to capture the highest levels of student psychological strain (Gaikwad & Bhattacharya, 2024).

Locus of Control was measured using The Rotter I-E scale which consists of 29 items (23 scored forced-choice pairs and 6 fillers) (Rotter, 1966). The scale has an indexed reliability coefficient of 0.88 and a test-retest reliability of 0.85 in Indian samples (Kumar & Srivastav, 1985).

Achievement Motivation was measured using the Deo-Mohan Achievement Motivation Scale (DMAMS) a 50-item self-rating scale calibrated for Indian university students (Deo & Mohan, 1985). In this scale responses were measured using a 5-point Likert scale (Always to Never) (Mistry et al., 2024). This scale has an internal consistency i.e, reliability coefficient of 0.94 (Deo & Mohan, 1985),

Lastly Perceived Stress was measured using the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS) developed by Cohen et al. (1983) that consists of 14 items measuring personal feelings of uncontrollability (Cohen et al., 1983). The responses in this scale are measured using a 5 point likert scale ranging from Never (0) to Very Often (4). This scale has shown test-retest reliability of more than 0.70 across various studies.

Data was analysed using SPSS version 27.0. Descriptive statistics (mean, SD) were used to summarize demographic data. Pearson Correlation was used to test H1 and H2. Hierarchical Multiple Regression was utilized to test the moderation effect of Locus of Control on the relationship between Achievement Motivation and Perceived Stress (H3).

7. Results

Our analysis has confirmed that there exists a significant positive correlation between achievement motivation and perceived stress ($r = 0.42$, $p < 0.05$). This confirms H1, indicating that the inner urge to attain excellence i.e. achievement motivation is a major contributor to psychological pressure i.e. perceived stress in Mumbai's academic climate (Gaikwad & Bhattacharya, 2024).

The results also supported H2, showing that internal LoC significantly predicts lower stress levels ($r = -0.38$, $p < 0.01$) (Abouserie, 1994). Students with a high internal LoC reported a mean stress score of 24.5, while those with an external orientation scored 38.2, reflecting the powerful "buffering" role of personal agency as a result of Internal LoC (Suraj et al., 2024).

In order to study the moderation effect of LoC on the relationship between achievement motivation and perceived stress hierarchical multiple regression was performed; through this we tested the interaction effect of LoC and Achievement Motivation on Perceived Stress

thereby confirming H3. The interaction term (Achievement Motivation \times Locus of Control) was significant ($\beta = -0.29$, $p < 0.05$), confirming that LoC moderates the motivation-stress relationship. For students with a high internal LoC, the slope of the relationship between motivation and stress was flatter, whereas for externals, high motivation led to a sharp increase in stress (Kulkarni et al., 2025).

Mumbai-specific data revealed that 91% of students in professional programs report moderate to severe stress, with "competition with peers" cited as the top stressor (Gaikwad & Bhattacharya, 2024).

8. Discussion

This study validates H1 i.e. Achievement Motivation leads to higher perceived stress. The validation of H1 underscores the "dark side" of achievement motivation in hyper-competitive ecosystems. Gen Z MBA students in Mumbai are "laser-focused" on ROI and brand reputation, which drives high preparation but also creates a "constant on" state of mind leading to stress (GMAC, 2023; Subramanyam, 2025). This constant thinking of getting a high paying job, joining a great company and failure being unacceptable can lead to clinical burnout if the student does not have the psychological resources to manage the load (Puah et al., 2024).

This research also confirmed H2 which demonstrates that students with a higher internal locus of control were less likely to perceive stress. This therefore shows that an internal LoC is a vital predictor of mental resilience (Rajagopal & Sivaranjani, 2025). Students who believe their efforts determine their placement outcomes feel more free and less overwhelmed by unforeseen events like internship rejections (Rotter, 1966). This internal sense of responsibility allows them to focus on "mastery-approach" goals, which reduces the debilitating effects of anxiety (Cassidy & Eachus, 2000).

In this research we also found that locus of control did act as a moderator between the relationship between achievement motivation and perceived stress wherein students who had a high achievement motivation and internal locus of control were perceived less stress as compared to students who had a high achievement motivation and external locus of control perceived higher stress thus supporting H3. This is the study's most significant contribution, proving that how a student perceives control determines the psychological "price" of their ambition. When a student has a high need for achievement but feels outcomes are dictated by "powerful others" (external LoC), the stress of expectations becomes toxic (Kahn et al., 2023). However, for internals, motivation acts as a "fuel" that promotes vitality and persistence, as they feel capable of influencing their trajectory.

9. Theoretical and Practical Implications

This study contributes to the literature by demonstrating the moderating power of locus of control in the transactional model of stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).. It re-validates Rotter's and McClelland's theories for the 2020s, showing that cognitive control beliefs are essential for channeling achievement needs into healthy performance (Rotter, 1966; McClelland, 1961). Management institutes should prioritize "Locus of Control Training" to help students become aware of their locus of control and slowly create a sense of internal agency to transition from external to internal orientations (Rajagopal & Sivaranjani, 2025). Reducing the frequency of examinations and providing more experiential, "real-world" learning can help students maintain a sense of mastery (Gaikwad & Bhattacharya, 2021). Institutes must provide professional counselling to help students manage "Fear of Failure" which is essential especially

during the high-stakes placement season.

Organizations should adopt "competency-based" recruitment that values resilience and intrapersonal skills over just technical GPAs (McClelland, 1973; Boyatzis, 1982). Employers can attract Gen Z talent by offering "people-centered" leadership and mental health support, as 82% of students value a supportive supervisor as a key motivator (Sinha & Sonawane, 2024)..

10. Limitations and Future Research

10.1. Limitations

One of the limitations of the study is its limited sample size and to management students of Mumbai alone due to our choice of convenience sampling technique. Therefore, the generalizability of our study is limited to urban Mumbai alone and the results may differ among students in other cities and in rural India (Mistry et al., 2024). Along with the sampling limitation, the cross-sectional nature of the study means that our results have only captured a snapshot of students' psychological states during the placement window (Gaikwad & Bhattacharya, 2024).

10.2. Future Research

Future studies should conduct a longitudinal study that follows students right from their entry into an MBA program through their first year of employment to track shifts in control orientation (Lee & Jang, 2025). Future studies can also investigate the role of Artificial Intelligence in augmenting or eroding a student's sense of professional agency which would also be highly valuable (Stamatiadis, 2025; Lee & Jang, 2025)..

11. Conclusion

This research confirms that achievement motivation is a significant source of perceived stress Gen Z MBA students in Mumbai (Arellano Villa & Sebastian, 2021; Sinha & Sonawane, 2024). But an internal locus of control serves as a powerful protective buffer that reduces baseline stress and moderates the intensity of achievement motivation-induced strain (Rajagopal & Sivaranjani, 2025). Therefore, by fostering an internal sense of agency, management institutes and recruiters can ensure that the next generation of Indian leaders are not just high-performing, but psychologically thriving (Elizabeth Chacko et al., 2023; Gallup, 2025).

12. References

- Abouserie, R. (1994). Sources and levels of stress in relation to locus of control and self-esteem in university students. *Educational Psychology*, 14(3), 323-330.
- Aggarwal, S., et al. (2022). Career development and autonomy as drivers of Gen Z engagement. *Journal of Management Research*.
- Arellano Villa, & Sebastian. (2021). Internal control and mathematics achievement among first-year students in the Philippines. *Journal of Educational Psychology*.
- Arora, N. (2024). A study on examining academic burnout among Indian college students. *The International Journal of Indian Psychology*, 12(4).
- Boyatzis, R.E. (1982) *The Competent Manager: A Model for Effective Performance*. John Wiley & Sons, New York.
- Chacko, E., et al. (2023). Career aspirations, workplace challenges, and performance dynamics of Generation Z employees. *Library Progress International*, 44(3), 24875-24889.
- Cohen, S., Kamarck, T., & Mermelstein, R. (1983). A global measure of perceived stress. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, 24(4), 385-396.
- Daumiller, M., & Zarrinabadi, N. (2021). "My goal is to do the best that I can in this

class”: Relevance of potential-based achievement goals for intrinsic motivation and course performance. *International Journal of Psychology*, 56(6), 934–940. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ijop.12792>

- Deo, P., & Mohan, A. (1985). *Manual for Deo-Mohan Achievement Motivation Scale*. National Psychological Corporation.
- Gaikwad, A., & Bhattacharya, S. (2024). Stress and academic performance in higher education: A study of management students. *Journal of Informatics Education and Research*.
- Gallup & Walton Family Foundation. (2025). *Voices of Gen Z Study: 2025 Annual Report*.
- GMAC. (2023). *Gen Z Report: Country Profile India - Values and Drivers in Graduate Management Education*.
- Hillert A., Albrecht A., Voderholzer U. (2020). The burnout phenomenon: A résumé after more than 15,000 scientific publications. *Front. Psychiatry* 11:519237. [10.3389/fpsy.2020.519237](https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsy.2020.519237)
- Ibrahim, H., & Elsabahy, H. (2020). Locus of control and its relationship with academic achievement. *Nursing Journal*.
- Kahn, J. H., Fishman, J. I., Galati, S. L., & Meyer, D. M. (2023). Perfectionism, locus of control, and academic stress among college students. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 213, 112313. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2023.112313>
- Kulkarni, N., Naik, A. R., & Panchal, D. N. (2025). Psychosocial correlates of academic stress: Evidence on locus of control and coping styles among Indian university students. *Research Square*.
- Laeequddin, M., et al. (2024). Investigating mental health and well-being among MBA students during campus placement season in India. *Mental Health and Social Inclusion*, 28(4).
- Lakhani, K. K. (2024). Local train commuting impacts students' academic outcomes. *International Journal of Indian Psychology*, 12(3).
- Lazarus, R. S., & Folkman, S. (1984). *Stress, appraisal, and coping*. Springer Publishing.
- Lee, M., & Jang, Y. (2025). Longitudinal relationships between academic self-control and achievement motivation during different adolescence stages. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 117(2), 292–307. <https://doi.org/10.1037/edu0000922>
- McClelland, D.C. (1961) *The Achieving Society*. Van Nostrand, Princeton. <https://doi.org/10.1037/14359-000>
- McClelland, D. C. (1973). Testing for competence rather than for "intelligence." *American Psychologist*, 28(1), 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0034092>
- Mistry, S., Halder, M., Karmakar, M., & Adhikari, S. (2024). Reliability and validity of the adopted Bengali versioned Self-Concept inventory. *International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research*, 6(3). <https://doi.org/10.36948/ijfmr.2024.v06i03.23379>
- Patel, N. S., Puah, S., & Kok, X. K. (2024). Shaping future-ready graduates with mindset shifts: studying the impact of integrating critical and design thinking in design innovation education. *Frontiers in Education*, 9. <https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2024.1358431>

- Rajagopal, R., & Sivaranjani, P. (2025). Achievement motivation among students with internal and external locus of control: A comparative study. *International Journal For Multidisciplinary Research*, 7(6).
- Roddenberry, A., & Renk, K. (2010). Locus of Control and Self-Efficacy: Potential Mediators of Stress, Illness, and Utilization of Health Services in College Students. *Child Psychiatry & Human Development*, 41, 353-370. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10578-010-0173-6>
- Rotter, J. B. (1966). Generalized expectancies for internal versus external control of reinforcement. *Psychological Monographs: General and Applied*, 80(1), 1–28. <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0092976>
- Sinha, T. S., & Sonawane, V. (2024). The expectations from the first job of Gen Z pursuing management. *International Journal of Creative Research Thoughts*, 12(7).
- Stamatiadis, K. (2025). AI and Locus of Control: A behavioral framework for the workplace. *FIU Doctoral Thesis*.
- Tiwale, S. (2025, December 8). Mumbai's daily commute: A journey through stress and anxiety. *Citizen Matters*.
- Williams, K. (2015). A qualitative study on perception of Gen Z's of Mumbai. *Eco-Sci*.
- Zerega, W. D., et al. (1976). Stability and concurrent validity of the Rotter Internal-External Locus of Control Scale. *Educational and Psychological Measurement*.