
Academic Ritualistic Behaviours and Exam Stress: Insights from Generation Z Undergraduates in Sri Lanka

Igalage Nethmi Dilupaba Dissanayake¹, Nilanga Abeysinghe^{1*}

¹*School of Psychology, Sri Lanka Institute of Information Technology (SLIIT), Malabe, 10115, Sri Lanka*

Corresponding author*: nilanga.a@sliit.lk

Abstract

This study explores the role of Academic Ritualistic Behaviours (ARB) in managing exam stress among Generation Z university students in Sri Lanka. Exams are often highly stress-inducing events, and this research aims to examine how ritualistic behaviours rooted in personal, cultural, generational, and psychological frameworks help students in managing exam-related stress. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with six undergraduates between ages 18 to 26, till data saturation. The interview transcripts were thematically analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework, and the analysis gave rise to three themes: (1) Personal and cultural anchors: Rituals rooted in family, tradition, and peer influence; (2) Rituals as emotional needs: Objects, music, and symbolic actions providing comfort and focus; and (3) Technology-infused rituals: Apps, digital platforms, and manifestation practices shaping modern coping. While rituals promoted reassurance and structure, overreliance sometimes heightened anxiety when disrupted, highlighting the double-edged nature of such practices. The Findings suggest that academic ritualistic behaviours influenced by cultural heritage and digital practices contribute to resilience, focus, and emotional stability during exams, but also reveal potential risks of overreliance. They emphasise the need for educators and researchers to acknowledge both benefits and risks associated with these behaviours when addressing student wellbeing.

Keywords: Ritualistic behaviours, academic ritualistic behaviours, academic success, cultural influence, Gen Z

Introduction

Exams have constantly influenced students' academic journey from school to university life. As students transition into higher education, competition and pressure intensify, making exam periods particularly stressful (Murphy et al., 2010). To navigate this stress, students often adopt various coping mechanisms, including specific study routines, lucky charms, or pre-exam rituals. These practices, embedded with symbolic meaning, evolve within academic settings into what can be described as Academic Ritualistic Behaviours (ARB). Although there are studies exploring the impact of academic stress during exam period, research examining the role of ritualistic coping behaviours among Generation Z (Gen Z) undergraduates, particularly in Sri Lanka, remains limited. This study addresses this gap by exploring how Academic Ritualistic Behaviours (ARB) shape stress management during university exams.

Unlike habits, rituals are actions embedded with symbolic meaning (Arnold et al., 2020). For instance, a “blessed” pen given by a teacher carries emotional and cultural weight, often offering reassurance despite lacking a logical basis (Hobson et al., 2018). These behaviours provide structure in uncertain situations, echoing Malinowski’s (1948) classic study, which showed how Trobriand Islanders used rituals more frequently in risky situations, a pattern also observed in modern stress responses. These ARB can be explained through theories such as operant conditioning (Skinner, 1948). Where behaviours are reinforced when followed by desired outcomes or classical conditioning theorised by Pavlov (1927) where repeated rituals are connected with academic performance. Additionally, self-regulation theory suggests that ARB help students manage anxiety and maintain focus by creating a goal-oriented learning environment (Carver & Scheier, 1982). Their role as structured strategies that transform stress into a sense of predictability is hence highlighted.

In Sri Lanka, cultural rituals are often deeply intertwined with everyday behaviours. Though Gen Z may be less religiously affiliated than previous generations as noted by Njotorahardjo et al. (2023), superstitious and belief-driven behaviours persist possibly due to personal meaning rather than strict religious ties (Krisnatalia et al., 2023). While traditional cultural rituals continue to provide emotional and spiritual comfort, Gen Z has uniquely adapted these practices into digital forms, blending cultural practices with modern technological expressions. Alongside the rise of technology and the desire for success, an industry of social media influencers and content creators who capitalise on how Gen Z and the younger generations think have emerged. They have popularised unique approaches to productivity in aesthetically pleasing ways, including study vlogs, and trends such as “manifestation and visualization” (Dixon et al., 2023).

However, while rituals can offer psychological safety, overreliance may increase stress if disrupted. Students with low self-efficacy may place too much importance on rituals, risking reduced internal control and motivation (Barkoukis et al., 2011). This tension shows the duality of ARB, they can bring comfort and focus during stressful times, but they can also leave students feeling unsettled and vulnerable if those rituals are broken.

Given this dual role, it becomes important to explore how Gen Z undergraduates in Sri Lanka experience ARB in relation to exam stress. Accordingly, this study asks: How do Academic Ritualistic Behaviours (ARB) influence the ways in which Gen Z undergraduates in Sri Lanka manage exam-related stress?

Materials and methods

This section outlines the research design, participant selection, data collection, and analytical procedures adopted in the study.

Design

A qualitative study design was employed, using semi-structured interviews to explore the emotional and behavioural aspects of ARB among Gen Z undergraduates in Sri Lanka. Semi-structured interviews were chosen as they could contribute to generate rich, in-depth insights while facilitating flexible and interactive conversations (Kakilla, 2021).

Participants

Six undergraduates aged 18-26 were selected through purposive sampling, based on their diverse use of ARB identified in preliminary screening using a Google Form. While a small sample, this allowed in-depth exploration until thematic saturation was reached, balancing depth over breadth.

Materials and procedure

An interview guide with 10 open-ended questions was developed to explore the types of ARB used, their origins, emotional impact, and whether they influenced adaptive coping. Interviews were held either in person or online, depending on convenience. After a brief introduction and consent the interviews were recorded. They lasted between 30-60 minutes. The study obtained ethical clearance from the ethics review committee of the School of Psychology.

Analytical procedure

Interviews were transcribed and analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis. Coding allowed for the identification of key patterns and shared insights, which were then organised into meaningful themes. Pseudonyms were used to ensure confidentiality. The final themes formed the foundation for the discussion by connecting participant experiences to broader psychological theories and literature.

Results and discussion

Three overarching themes were identified, each capturing the ways in which ARB helped Gen Z undergraduates manage exam stress.

Table 1: Themes and subthemes of Academic Ritualistic Behaviours (ARB)

Theme	Subthemes
Personal and cultural anchors	Emotional and cultural significance Peer influence
Grounded in ritual, fueled by meaning	
Technology-infused rituals and emerging beliefs	Tech meets tradition Manifestation, effort-based motivation, and the role of belief When the ritual breaks

Note. ARB = Academic Ritualistic Behaviors.

Theme 1: Personal and cultural anchors

This theme captures the way students draw family traditions, cultural practices, and peer influences to create rituals that help them feel stable during exam periods. The following sub-themes illustrate how these anchors operate at the intersection of personal meaning, cultural aspects, and social dynamics.

Emotional and cultural significance

ARB are deeply personal acts that offer emotional reassurance, distinguishing them from mere habits. Anna described the emotional significance of her ritual, "*Calling my mom right before entering the exam hall makes me feel grounded*". Similarly, Nara has a structured study method, ensuring every unit turns green on an Excel sheet before exams reflects the confidence associated with visual progress. These instances depict the subjective nature of ARB shaped by individual needs.

Cultural and familial traditions also shape ARB development. Nara's attachment to a specific pen, influenced by her cousin, or John's ritual of drinking water during difficult questions in exams, as taught by a childhood teacher, highlights the lasting impact of guidance in childhood. Even when

individuals recognise the placebo effect, the ritual persists, underlining Malinowski's (1948) view that rituals offer psychological relief in uncertain situations. Further, Ron's experience reflects a transition from Buddhist to Christian practices, initially visiting the *Kalutara Bodhiya*, and later adopting the ritual of lighting candles at church to pray "...for good health and good marks." Showing how cultural traditions evolve into coping mechanisms (Doka, 2022). They may adapt over time, but still offer comfort and hope.

Peer influence

ARB may also be reinforced through social interactions. As Anna shared, "...like staying awake for 24 hours and making nice notes... those have been like influence from my friends". Similarly, Shawn explained how playing music while studying became a shared ritual among his hostel friends, "...I think they got used to it because of me..." reflecting how rituals can spread unconsciously. These shared practices can create a sense of connection and belonging (Bhugra & Ventriglio, 2024). They may also lead students to follow routines simply because others do, without questioning their usefulness. This supports the idea that some ARB may be arbitrary and lack logical reasoning (Arnold et al., 2020). Still, their continued use highlights that value often lies not in logic, but in the comfort and sense of community they provide.

Theme 2: Grounded in ritual, fuelled by meaning

This theme reflects how students engage in rituals not only as structured routines, but also as avenues of emotional support. They help regulate anxiety, sustain motivation, and buffer exam stress through actions and objects demonstrating the deep psychological importance of ritualistic behaviours.

ARB served as powerful tools to emotionally steady themselves when facing exam-related stress. Ron's statement, "I had given up. So, I didn't want to do A-Levels anymore," and John's reflection that "A-Levels just knocked it out..." illustrate the emotional strain students face in pressurising academic environments in Sri Lanka. In response, some turned to music as a coping tool. Shawn shared, "...listening to a specific playlist of instrumental music helps me stay calm and focused before exams," while Ron added, "I have to listen to music while studying, otherwise I get distracted a lot." These behaviours are examples of emotion-focused coping, where stress is managed through emotional regulation rather than problem-solving (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980). Some rituals act as conditioned responses. John's ritual of drinking water illustrates classical conditioning (Pavlov, 1927). Repeatedly pairing drinking water with calmness during difficult questions conditioned him to experience reduced anxiety during examinations. Beyond emotion regulation, rituals provide a comforting sense of predictability. John explained, "...up until that day, I'm using WhatsApp and YouTube, and all of a sudden I'm not supposed to use it..." highlighting how abrupt changes can trigger stress. This is true for individuals with an external locus of control or strong superstitious beliefs (Barkoukis et al., 2011). If rituals are interrupted that may weaken these individuals as they may attribute outcomes to luck or fate.

Spiritual and sentimental objects also hold significance, such as Anna's ring from her grandmother, which she wore during exams as a source of comfort, instilling confidence. Shawn also observed peers carrying talismans or reciting prayers, reflecting how culturally rooted practices continue to shape Gen Z students' academic coping strategies in Sri Lanka.

Theme 3: Technology-infused rituals and emerging beliefs

This theme shows how Gen Z students blend traditional practices with modern digital tools and belief-based strategies. Technology, manifestations, and visualisation merge with inherited cultural habits, showing how rituals evolve in modern context while also generating new vulnerabilities when they are disrupted.

Tech meets tradition

Gen Z's academic adaptations are characterised by a shift toward technology-driven rituals. Apps such as Forest helped participants manage distractions, while co-study platforms foster virtual accountability and peer support. Videos stimulating parental oversight, such as the one Clara mentioned featuring a "...mom checking in every 10 minutes..." reflect a desire for structured motivation despite Gen Z's reputation for independence (Tysiac, 2017). These tools, while effective, may also show reliance on external support, potentially weakening one's ability to regulate stress from within. Further, Music remains a constant across generations, now curated through platforms such as Spotify to create personalised playlists, blending inherited traditions with personalised digital environments.

Meanwhile, Social media emerges as both a distraction and a motivational catalyst. Participants acknowledge its addictive qualities but also its role in academic organisation, creativity, and motivation. Nara explained, she trusted Ali Abdaal's study methods because they were "...scientifically proven...", reflecting a tendency to value evidence-backed content over mere popularity. This highlights how belief in the legitimacy of a method, according to Benedetti et al. (2005), can itself generate a placebo-like confidence that enhances academic performance, regardless of the method's actual effectiveness.

Manifestation, effort-based motivation, and the role of belief

Gen Z's ARB often include manifestation, visualization, and effort-based approaches. Clara used subliminal music to reinforce focus and motivation, suggesting how belief in a method significantly boosts confidence. Further, Nara noted "...because in my head, I feel like if you are going to say positive affirmations to yourself, there's already a self-belief that you are not that" suggesting that positive affirmations may only work if self-belief already exists. However, this may not apply in collectivist cultures such as Sri Lanka, where self-esteem is tied to family and social harmony rather than individual traits (de Zoysa et al., 2021). Making such practices more relevant in individualistic societies.

When the ritual breaks

Participants also described the fragility of ARB. Shawn reflected, "I remember losing confidence during exams when I remembered I couldn't listen to my playlist," denoting how dependency on specific rituals may be disruptive. Aligning with Barkoukis et al. (2011), who suggest relying on external or superstitious beliefs can increase anxiety when they are challenged. This challenges the self-regulation theory which discusses adaptability (Carever & Scheier, 1982). In cultures such as Sri Lanka, rituals are deeply embedded in family values and traditions, making them harder to change. Further, Digital distractions and external pressures are other challenges. While Nara used self-regulation strategies to manage social media use, Ron felt overwhelmed by rigid structures imposed by a teacher. This indicates how failing to adapt ARB to personal preferences can hinder long-term success.

Limitations

The study's small sample size and qualitative design limit the generalisability of findings, as results primarily reflect individual experiences. Additionally, cultural, religious, and gender influences may have shaped responses, and the use of semi-structured interviews could have introduced subtle leading cues.

Future recommendations

Future research should expand to larger and more diverse samples to capture broader perspectives and probably consider a mixed approach. Studies could also investigate ritualistic behaviours beyond

academic contexts, comparing cultural variations, and examining potential differences between adaptive and maladaptive ritual use.

Conclusion

This study highlights how ARB, influenced by culture, personal rituals, and technology, provides emotional stability during exam stress. Further, rituals rooted in family traditions and personal beliefs depict how comforting objects, faith-based practices, music playlists, manifestation, and visualisation techniques help students navigate exam stress and study effectively. Moreover, ARB are influenced by technological advancements, blending modern tools, study apps, and streaming platforms with traditional practices. However, relying heavily on ARB and digital distractions highlights the challenges in maintaining these behaviours. Further, disrupting these rituals may paradoxically heighten stress, while external pressures such as peer influence and societal expectations add to it. The evolving significance of ARB as coping mechanisms within academic settings are signified in this study. By recognising their psychological and cultural importance, educators and researchers can focus on designing balanced stress management strategies that acknowledge both the benefits and the potential risks of ARB, ensuring student wellbeing is supported without fostering unhealthy dependency.

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