

# The Impact of Family Conflict on Academic Disengagement Mediated by Emotional Exhaustion in Adolescents

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## Article Info

### Article type:

Original Research

### How to cite this article:

Özdemir, M., & Hakobyan, A. (2025). The Impact of Family Conflict on Academic Disengagement Mediated by Emotional Exhaustion in Adolescents. *Journal of Adolescent and Youth Psychological Studies*, 6(7), 1-9.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.61838/kman.jayps.4356>



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## ABSTRACT

**Objective:** This study aimed to investigate the relationship between family conflict and academic disengagement among adolescents, with emotional exhaustion examined as a potential mediating variable.

**Methods and Materials:** A descriptive–correlational research design was employed, with a sample of 388 secondary school students from Armenia selected based on Krejcie and Morgan’s sample size table using stratified random sampling. Standardized instruments were administered, including the Family Conflict subscale of the Family Environment Scale, the Emotional Exhaustion subscale of the Maslach Burnout Inventory–Student Survey, and the Academic Disengagement subscale of the Student Engagement Instrument. Data analysis was performed using SPSS-27 for descriptive statistics and Pearson correlation, and AMOS-21 for Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) to test the hypothesized mediation model. Model fit was evaluated using  $\chi^2/df$ , GFI, AGFI, CFI, RMSEA, and TLI indices, with significance set at  $p < .05$ .

**Findings:** Pearson correlation results indicated that family conflict was positively correlated with both emotional exhaustion ( $r = .54$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and academic disengagement ( $r = .46$ ,  $p < .001$ ), while emotional exhaustion had the strongest correlation with academic disengagement ( $r = .62$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The SEM analysis demonstrated good model fit ( $\chi^2/df = 2.19$ , GFI = 0.95, AGFI = 0.93, CFI = 0.97, RMSEA = 0.056, TLI = 0.96). Family conflict significantly predicted emotional exhaustion ( $\beta = 0.54$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and academic disengagement both directly ( $\beta = 0.27$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and indirectly via emotional exhaustion ( $\beta = 0.28$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The total effect of family conflict on academic disengagement was  $\beta = 0.55$  ( $p < .001$ ), confirming partial mediation.

**Conclusion:** The findings suggest that emotional exhaustion serves as a significant psychological mechanism linking family conflict to academic disengagement among adolescents.

**Keywords:** Family conflict; Emotional exhaustion; Academic disengagement; Adolescents

## 1. Introduction

Academic disengagement among adolescents has emerged as a significant concern in educational and psychological research due to its adverse implications for learning outcomes, personal development, and future occupational success. Disengagement is characterized by a withdrawal from academic activities, a decline in effort, and an erosion of motivation, often resulting in diminished performance and limited skill acquisition (Ma, 2022). It reflects a multifaceted phenomenon encompassing behavioral, emotional, and cognitive dimensions that collectively undermine students' engagement with the learning process (Tumelo & Donald, 2025). This problem is increasingly observed in diverse cultural and educational contexts, suggesting that it is not restricted to specific socio-economic or geographic boundaries but rather is driven by broad psychosocial and institutional factors (Rashid et al., 2025). Adolescents, as a developmental group navigating transitions in identity formation, peer relations, and academic demands, are particularly susceptible to disengagement when they encounter sustained stressors in their home or school environments (Ramos-Vera et al., 2025).

Central to understanding academic disengagement is the recognition of emotional exhaustion as a psychological mechanism linking various stressors to diminished academic commitment. Emotional exhaustion, a core component of burnout, refers to the depletion of emotional and physical resources necessary for sustained academic effort (Husain et al., 2025). It manifests when individuals feel overextended and unable to meet the emotional demands of their academic roles (Nuradilla, 2024). This depletion can erode students' sense of efficacy, reduce persistence, and foster a sense of detachment from academic goals (Mann et al., 2024). Importantly, emotional exhaustion is not only a direct reaction to academic stressors but also a mediating process that channels the influence of broader interpersonal and contextual stress into disengagement (Bayot et al., 2024).

The conceptual link between stressors and emotional exhaustion has been extensively examined within both occupational and educational settings. The challenge-hindrance stressor framework posits that while some demands can be perceived as growth-promoting challenges, others function as hindrances that obstruct goal attainment and lead to strain (Bao et al., 2024). Adolescents often interpret unresolved interpersonal conflicts—particularly within the family—as hindrance stressors that offer no

apparent developmental benefit and instead deplete psychological resources (Yang, 2023). This process aligns with burnout models that conceptualize exhaustion as the initial stage in a cascade leading to cynicism, disengagement, and ultimately reduced achievement (Baka et al., 2023). The sustained strain of such experiences can alter coping patterns, limit the ability to recover from academic setbacks, and perpetuate a disengaged stance toward learning (Aldbyani et al., 2023).

Family conflict represents a potent source of psychosocial strain for adolescents, shaping both emotional well-being and academic trajectories. Defined as the occurrence of frequent, intense, and poorly resolved disagreements among family members, such conflict can undermine adolescents' sense of security and emotional stability (Xu et al., 2022). These conditions often disrupt the cognitive and emotional focus necessary for academic engagement, leading to avoidance behaviors and reduced participation in school activities (Umer et al., 2022). Within the stressor-strain-outcome model, family conflict functions as a distal stressor that may operate through intermediate psychological mechanisms, including emotional exhaustion, to influence disengagement (Ogunfowora et al., 2022). Adolescents who experience ongoing familial discord may develop maladaptive cognitive schemas about relationships, authority, and effort investment, which translate into reduced perseverance in academic contexts (Ma, 2022).

Research on emotional exhaustion consistently points to its role as a mediator between interpersonal stressors and disengaged behaviors. For example, studies in workplace contexts have demonstrated that relationship conflict escalates into disengagement primarily through the draining effect of emotional exhaustion (Li, 2022). Similarly, in educational environments, emotional exhaustion has been shown to mediate the relationship between stressors and academic burnout, with downstream effects on disengagement and performance (Klusmann et al., 2022). The mechanisms underpinning this mediation involve diminished affective resources, impaired emotion regulation, and increased cognitive interference, all of which limit the capacity to sustain engagement (Kersten et al., 2022). Evidence further suggests that exhaustion reduces the ability to benefit from supportive interactions and resources, exacerbating the disengagement cycle (Landay et al., 2021).

While disengagement can arise from a range of situational and individual factors, the literature highlights the compounding effect of multiple concurrent stressors, such as family conflict and high academic demands. When

these stressors converge, the likelihood of emotional exhaustion increases significantly, thereby elevating the risk of disengagement (Haq et al., 2021). The interplay between stress intensity, perceived controllability, and resource availability determines the extent to which exhaustion translates into disengagement (Baka & Prusik, 2021). Moreover, the impact of these processes may be moderated by individual differences, including emotional regulation capacity, coping style, and moral disengagement tendencies (Aftab & Malik, 2021). Adolescents with lower resilience or higher susceptibility to emotional manipulation may be more vulnerable to the exhausting effects of family conflict, thereby experiencing sharper declines in academic engagement (Lee et al., 2020).

Despite the robust theoretical and empirical foundation linking family conflict, emotional exhaustion, and academic disengagement, gaps remain in understanding these relationships within adolescent populations, particularly in non-Western contexts. Much of the existing literature has been derived from either occupational settings or university student samples, leaving the developmental nuances of secondary school students underexplored (Tumelo & Donald, 2025). Moreover, cultural norms around family interaction, emotional expression, and academic expectations may shape both the experience of conflict and its consequences (Rashid et al., 2025). For instance, in collectivist cultural contexts, the perceived threat to group harmony inherent in family conflict may heighten emotional exhaustion and accelerate disengagement (Ramos-Vera et al., 2025). Conversely, cultural emphasis on academic achievement may intensify the pressure to maintain engagement despite exhaustion, leading to complex patterns of coping and burnout (Husain et al., 2025).

Furthermore, methodological limitations in previous studies—such as reliance on cross-sectional designs without mediation analysis—have constrained the ability to draw causal inferences about the role of emotional exhaustion. Recent advances in statistical modeling, particularly Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), offer the opportunity to test complex mediational pathways and account for measurement error, thereby enhancing the validity of findings (Nuradilla, 2024). This approach allows researchers to simultaneously estimate direct and indirect effects, providing a more nuanced understanding of how family conflict translates into disengagement through emotional exhaustion (Mann et al., 2024). By applying SEM to adolescent samples, researchers can contribute both

theoretically and practically to interventions aimed at mitigating disengagement (Bayot et al., 2024).

The current study addresses these gaps by examining the mediating role of emotional exhaustion in the relationship between family conflict and academic disengagement among adolescents.

## 2. Methods and Materials

### 2.1. Study Design and Participants

The present study employed a descriptive–correlational design to investigate the impact of family conflict on academic disengagement mediated by emotional exhaustion among adolescents. The target population comprised secondary school students in Armenia during the 2024–2025 academic year. Based on the Krejcie and Morgan (1970) sample size determination table, a sample of 388 participants was deemed adequate to represent the population with a 95% confidence level. Participants were selected through stratified random sampling to ensure proportional representation of gender and grade level. Inclusion criteria required that participants be enrolled in secondary education, aged between 14 and 18 years, and willing to provide informed consent (with parental approval for minors).

### 2.2. Measures

Academic disengagement was measured using the Academic Disengagement subscale of the Student Engagement Instrument (SEI) developed by Appleton, Christenson, Kim, and Reschly (2006). This standardized tool assesses students' psychological and cognitive withdrawal from academic activities and responsibilities. The subscale includes 9 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ("strongly disagree") to 5 ("strongly agree"), with higher scores indicating greater disengagement. Items cover aspects such as reduced effort, lack of persistence, and diminished investment in learning. The SEI has demonstrated robust psychometric properties, with previous studies confirming high internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha values typically above 0.85) and strong construct validity across adolescent populations in various cultural contexts.

Family conflict was assessed using the Family Conflict subscale of the Family Environment Scale (FES) developed by Moos and Moos (1981). This instrument evaluates the degree of openly expressed anger, aggression, and conflict among family members. The subscale consists of 9 true–

false items addressing overt interpersonal tensions and disagreements within the family context. Scores are summed, with higher scores reflecting higher levels of perceived family conflict. The FES is widely recognized in family research, with numerous studies supporting its reliability (Cronbach's alpha typically ranging from 0.74 to 0.86) and validity through strong correlations with independent observational measures of family interaction.

Emotional exhaustion was measured using the Emotional Exhaustion subscale of the Maslach Burnout Inventory–Student Survey (MBI-SS), adapted from the original Maslach Burnout Inventory developed by Maslach and Jackson (1981). This subscale comprises 9 items rated on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (“never”) to 6 (“every day”), capturing the extent to which students feel emotionally drained, fatigued, and unable to cope with academic demands. Higher scores indicate greater emotional exhaustion. The MBI-SS has shown excellent psychometric properties, with previous studies reporting Cronbach's alpha values above 0.85 for the subscale and confirming its factorial validity across adolescent and young adult samples.

### 2.3. Data Analysis

Data analysis was performed using SPSS version 27 and AMOS version 21. Descriptive statistics, including means,

standard deviations, frequencies, and percentages, were calculated to summarize the demographic characteristics of the participants. Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to examine the bivariate relationships between the dependent variable (academic disengagement) and the independent variables (family conflict and emotional exhaustion). Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was employed to test the hypothesized mediating role of emotional exhaustion in the relationship between family conflict and academic disengagement. Model fit indices, including the chi-square/df ratio, Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Tucker–Lewis Index (TLI), and Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA), were used to evaluate model adequacy. Statistical significance was set at  $p < .05$ .

### 3. Findings and Results

Of the 388 participants, 201 (51.80%) were female and 187 (48.20%) were male. In terms of age distribution, 102 students (26.29%) were 14 years old, 95 students (24.48%) were 15 years old, 97 students (25.00%) were 16 years old, and 94 students (24.23%) were 17 years old. Regarding grade level, 129 students (33.25%) were in Grade 9, 128 students (32.99%) were in Grade 10, and 131 students (33.76%) were in Grade 11.

**Table 1**

*Means and Standard Deviations for Study Variables (N = 388)*

Variable	M	SD
Family Conflict	5.84	2.13
Emotional Exhaustion	27.65	8.42
Academic Disengagement	31.28	7.56

The descriptive statistics in Table 1 indicate that the mean score for family conflict was 5.84 (SD = 2.13), suggesting moderate levels of perceived conflict among participants. Emotional exhaustion had a mean score of 27.65 (SD = 8.42), which reflects a relatively high degree of emotional depletion in this adolescent sample. Academic disengagement recorded a mean of 31.28 (SD = 7.56), indicating that a substantial proportion of students experienced noticeable withdrawal from academic engagement.

Prior to analysis, the assumptions for Pearson correlation and Structural Equation Modeling were examined and confirmed. Normality was assessed using skewness and

kurtosis values, which ranged from  $-0.71$  to  $0.64$  for skewness and  $-0.89$  to  $0.77$  for kurtosis, all within the acceptable range of  $-2$  to  $+2$ . Linearity and homoscedasticity were verified through inspection of scatterplots, which indicated evenly distributed residuals without discernible patterns. Multicollinearity diagnostics revealed tolerance values ranging from 0.73 to 0.88 and Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values between 1.13 and 1.37, well below the threshold of 10. The Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy was 0.91, and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was statistically significant ( $\chi^2 = 2,134.57$ ,  $df = 45$ ,  $p < .001$ ), confirming the suitability of the data for multivariate analysis.

**Table 2***Pearson Correlations Between Study Variables (N = 388)*

Variable	1	2	3
1. Family Conflict	—		
2. Emotional Exhaustion	$r = .54, p < .001$	—	
3. Academic Disengagement	$r = .46, p < .001$	$r = .62, p < .001$	—

The correlation analysis presented in Table 2 shows significant positive associations among all study variables. Family conflict was positively correlated with emotional exhaustion ( $r = .54, p < .001$ ) and academic disengagement ( $r = .46, p < .001$ ). Emotional exhaustion demonstrated the

strongest correlation with academic disengagement ( $r = .62, p < .001$ ), suggesting that higher levels of exhaustion are strongly linked to greater disengagement from academic activities.

**Table 3***Fit Indices for the Structural Model*

Fit Index	Value
$\chi^2$	118.37
df	54
$\chi^2/df$	2.19
GFI	0.95
AGFI	0.93
CFI	0.97
RMSEA	0.056
TLI	0.96

The SEM results in Table 3 indicate that the hypothesized model demonstrated an excellent fit to the data. The chi-square/df ratio was 2.19, well below the recommended maximum of 3.00, and the comparative fit indices (GFI =

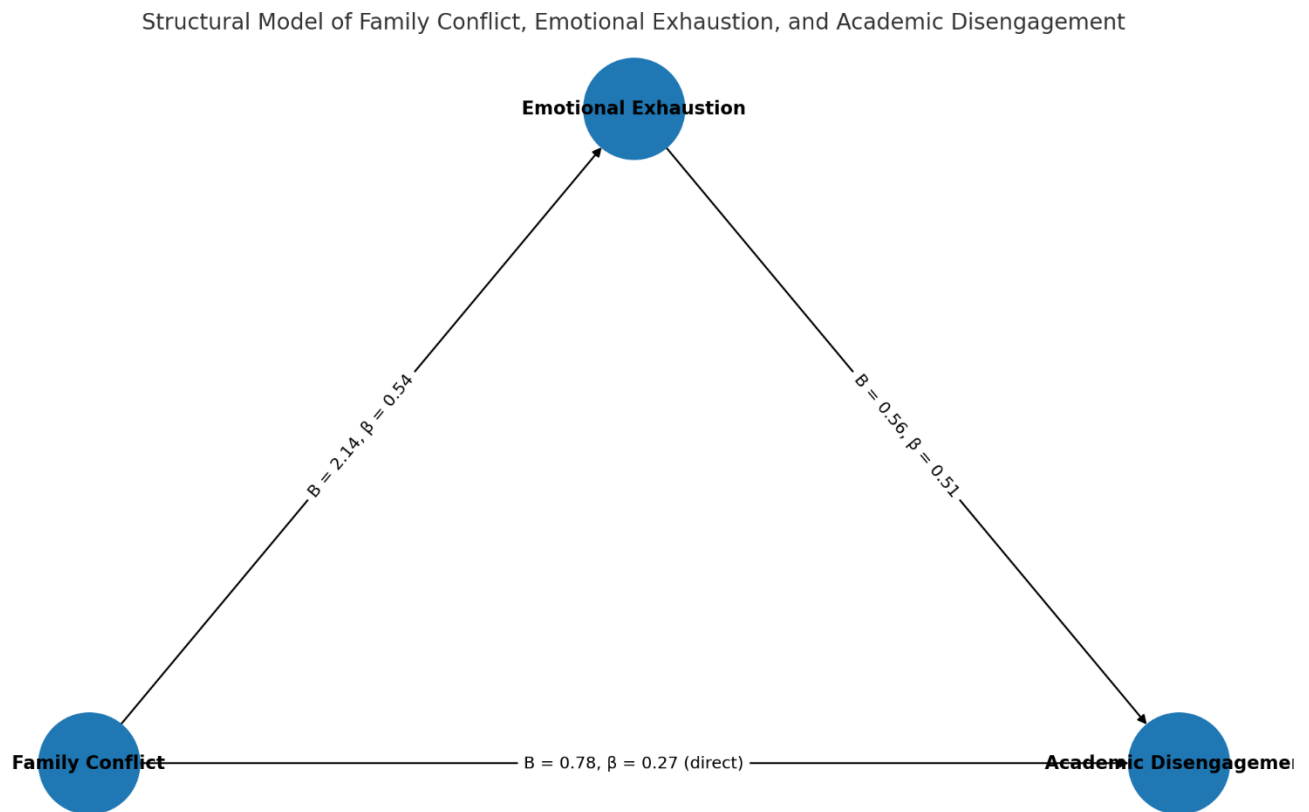
0.95, AGFI = 0.93, CFI = 0.97, TLI = 0.96) all exceeded the acceptable threshold of 0.90. The RMSEA value of 0.056 further supports a good model fit, falling below the 0.08 cutoff for acceptable fit.

**Table 4***Total, Direct, and Indirect Effects Between Study Variables in the Structural Model (N = 388)*

Path	b	S.E.	$\beta$	p
Family Conflict → Emotional Exhaustion	2.14	0.19	0.54	< .001
Emotional Exhaustion → Academic Disengagement	0.56	0.04	0.51	< .001
Family Conflict → Academic Disengagement (direct)	0.78	0.15	0.27	< .001
Family Conflict → Academic Disengagement (indirect via Emotional Exhaustion)	1.20	0.12	0.28	< .001
Family Conflict → Academic Disengagement (total)	1.98	0.14	0.55	< .001

As shown in Table 4, family conflict significantly predicted emotional exhaustion ( $b = 2.14, \beta = 0.54, p < .001$ ) and academic disengagement both directly ( $b = 0.78, \beta = 0.27, p < .001$ ) and indirectly via emotional exhaustion ( $b = 1.20, \beta = 0.28, p < .001$ ). Emotional exhaustion also had a strong positive effect on academic disengagement ( $b = 0.56,$

$\beta = 0.51, p < .001$ ). The total effect of family conflict on academic disengagement ( $b = 1.98, \beta = 0.55, p < .001$ ) underscores the substantial influence of family conflict, both directly and through emotional exhaustion, on disengagement outcomes.

**Figure 1***Structural Model of The Study*

#### 4. Discussion and Conclusion

The results of the present study demonstrate that family conflict is significantly and positively associated with academic disengagement among adolescents, with emotional exhaustion functioning as a partial mediator of this relationship. Pearson correlation analyses revealed that higher levels of family conflict were linked to greater emotional exhaustion and increased academic disengagement. The Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) further confirmed the hypothesized mediation model, indicating that emotional exhaustion accounted for a substantial proportion of the variance in disengagement. This suggests that while family conflict directly undermines academic engagement, its impact is amplified through the psychological depletion associated with emotional exhaustion. These findings provide empirical support for the stressor-strain-outcome framework, positioning emotional exhaustion as a pivotal mechanism in the translation of interpersonal strain into disengagement behaviors (Ramos-

Vera et al., 2025; Rashid et al., 2025; Tumelo & Donald, 2025).

The direct relationship between family conflict and academic disengagement aligns with prior research that has consistently identified negative family dynamics as a risk factor for reduced student engagement. Adolescents in environments characterized by persistent disputes and unresolved tensions are more likely to experience disruptions in concentration, diminished motivation, and a sense of alienation from academic goals (Husain et al., 2025). These outcomes can be understood within the challenge-hindrance stressor model, which classifies family conflict as a hindrance stressor—one that obstructs progress and depletes personal resources without offering potential developmental gains (Bao et al., 2024). In this regard, our findings mirror the evidence from workplace studies showing that relationship conflict, whether in family or organizational contexts, can escalate into disengagement through sustained strain (Li, 2022). Moreover, in adolescent samples, high conflict at home can undermine perceived support networks, which are essential for buffering academic

stressors, thereby directly reducing engagement (Yang, 2023).

The mediating role of emotional exhaustion observed in this study confirms its theoretical and empirical significance in explaining the link between interpersonal stressors and disengaged behavior. Consistent with the burnout literature, emotional exhaustion emerged as a psychological state marked by depleted affective and cognitive resources, which in turn inhibited sustained participation in academic activities (Mann et al., 2024; Nuradilla, 2024). Our results resonate with prior findings indicating that exhaustion mediates the effects of hindrance stressors on job and academic outcomes (Baka et al., 2023; Bayot et al., 2024). Specifically, adolescents exposed to chronic family conflict appear to invest significant emotional energy in managing or avoiding conflict, leaving fewer resources available for meeting academic demands. This mechanism parallels observations in adult populations, where emotional exhaustion has been shown to link interpersonal strain to reduced task performance (Ogunfowora et al., 2022) and work disengagement (Tumelo & Donald, 2025). In educational contexts, the same depletion process leads students to disengage from their studies as a means of conserving limited emotional resources (Umer et al., 2022).

The partial nature of the mediation indicates that other pathways likely contribute to the relationship between family conflict and academic disengagement. While emotional exhaustion captures the resource depletion mechanism, factors such as cynicism, lowered academic self-efficacy, and maladaptive coping strategies may also play mediating roles (Klusmann et al., 2022; Ramos-Vera et al., 2025). For instance, ongoing exposure to family conflict may foster maladaptive beliefs about the value of effort or the fairness of academic institutions, which can encourage withdrawal irrespective of exhaustion levels (Lee et al., 2020). Furthermore, negative emotional climates at home may diminish adolescents' perceived control over their environment, thereby fostering disengagement through learned helplessness processes (Baka & Prusik, 2021). The co-occurrence of these processes may help explain why the indirect effect via emotional exhaustion does not fully account for the family conflict–disengagement relationship.

Our findings also correspond with research on stress spillover, which suggests that strain from one life domain can impair functioning in another through emotional carryover effects (Kersten et al., 2022). Family conflict, as an emotionally salient stressor, may evoke rumination and persistent negative affect that extend into the academic

domain, thereby undermining the mental focus necessary for engagement (Aldbyani et al., 2023). This spillover mechanism is supported by studies showing that interpersonal stress outside of school is linked to poorer emotional regulation in the classroom, a critical skill for sustaining engagement (Ma, 2022). The compounding effect of such stressors may also interact with adolescents' developmental vulnerability to emotional dysregulation, amplifying the disengagement trajectory.

From a theoretical standpoint, the results integrate well with both the Job Demands–Resources (JD–R) model and the Conservation of Resources (COR) theory. The JD–R framework posits that high demands, such as family conflict, deplete resources and lead to exhaustion, which in turn precipitates disengagement (Bao et al., 2024; Landay et al., 2021). Similarly, COR theory suggests that individuals strive to retain, protect, and build resources, and when these are threatened or lost, they may withdraw from demanding activities as a defensive strategy (Haq et al., 2021). In this light, disengagement may serve as a self-protective mechanism against further resource depletion. The present study's findings thus reinforce the role of emotional exhaustion as both a signal and a driver of disengagement within these theoretical frameworks.

Interestingly, the strong association between emotional exhaustion and disengagement in our adolescent sample echoes findings from occupational contexts, indicating that the exhaustion–disengagement link may be a robust phenomenon across age groups and settings (Baka et al., 2023; Bayot et al., 2024). This cross-domain consistency suggests that interventions designed to reduce exhaustion—whether through conflict resolution training, emotional regulation skill-building, or resource enhancement—could be equally effective in academic contexts. Moreover, research on positive organizational behavior underscores the potential for resource-building interventions, such as fostering gratitude or mindfulness, to mitigate exhaustion and sustain engagement (Aldbyani et al., 2023; Kersten et al., 2022). Adapting such strategies to school settings could therefore be a promising avenue for reducing the detrimental impact of family conflict.

Another notable implication of our findings is the cultural context in which they were obtained. In settings where collectivist norms emphasize familial harmony, the presence of sustained conflict may carry an amplified psychological toll, increasing both exhaustion and disengagement (Rashid et al., 2025). Conversely, in more individualistic contexts, adolescents might compartmentalize family stress more

effectively, potentially attenuating the indirect effects via exhaustion. This cultural lens aligns with previous research indicating that the meaning and impact of stressors can be moderated by cultural expectations and socialization patterns (Yang, 2023). Future research could therefore benefit from explicitly examining cultural moderators in the family conflict–exhaustion–disengagement pathway.

## 5. Limitations & Suggestions

While the present study advances understanding of the mechanisms linking family conflict to academic disengagement, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the cross-sectional design precludes definitive causal inferences, as it cannot establish temporal precedence between variables. Longitudinal designs would be needed to confirm whether family conflict precedes increases in emotional exhaustion and disengagement over time. Second, reliance on self-reported measures may introduce common method bias, as participants' perceptions could be influenced by transient mood states or social desirability tendencies. Third, although the sample size was adequate for SEM, it was drawn exclusively from adolescents in Armenia, which may limit the generalizability of findings to other cultural or educational contexts. Finally, the study focused solely on emotional exhaustion as a mediator, whereas other relevant psychological processes—such as cynicism, resilience, or coping styles—were not assessed and could provide additional explanatory power.

Future studies should employ longitudinal or experimental designs to better establish causal relationships in the family conflict–emotional exhaustion–disengagement pathway. It would also be valuable to incorporate multi-informant approaches, such as collecting data from parents, teachers, and peers, to triangulate assessments of conflict, exhaustion, and disengagement. Expanding the model to include other potential mediators, such as academic self-efficacy, cynicism, or psychological resilience, could offer a more comprehensive understanding of the mechanisms at play. Additionally, future research could explore the role of cultural norms, socioeconomic status, and school climate as moderators of these relationships. Comparative studies across diverse cultural and educational systems would help to clarify the universality or specificity of the observed patterns.

The findings underscore the importance of addressing family conflict in interventions aimed at reducing academic disengagement. School counselors and psychologists could

implement programs focused on conflict resolution, communication skills, and emotional regulation for both students and their families. Enhancing adolescents' coping resources through mindfulness training, peer support groups, and stress management workshops may help to buffer the exhausting effects of family discord. Educators can also play a proactive role by identifying early signs of disengagement and collaborating with mental health professionals to provide timely support. Policy-level initiatives that promote school–family partnerships and integrate family well-being into educational planning could further contribute to sustaining student engagement.

## Acknowledgments

We would like to express our appreciation and gratitude to all those who cooperated in carrying out this study.

## Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

## Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

## Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

## Funding

This research was carried out independently with personal funding and without the financial support of any governmental or private institution or organization.

## Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this article.

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