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Impact of Dual-Workload on Subjective Well-Being and Daily Stress Levels among CA Articles in India and their Coping Strategies

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Abstract

Students undergoing Chartered Accountancy (CA) articleship in India have the dual responsibility of performing full-time work as well as studying for upcoming examinations. This experience is referred to as dual workload. This mixed-methods study explored how dual workload affected Indian CA Final students' subjective well-being and perceived daily stress, as well as which coping responses they most commonly used to manage said stress. 30 CA Final students completed quantitative measures including the Perceived Stress Scale-10 (PSS-10), Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWLS), and Ways of Coping Questionnaire (WCQ). Two participants were recruited for semi-structured interviews, which were later analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis. Results from quantitative measures showed clinically high levels of stress (M PSS-10 = 23.6) and overall, below-average life satisfaction (M SWLS = 17.8) within the sample. Additionally, none of the participants reported low stress levels. Emotion-focused coping was the most common coping response, followed by avoidance coping. Problem-focused coping was the least used among participants. Interview results culminated in 12 themes. Major themes include role overload, chronic psychological stress, and emotional burnout. Stress-Avoidance-Guilt Cycle, a theme unique to this experience, was also identified. Findings are discussed using organisational role stress theory, the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping, and the Job Demands-Resources Model. Practical implications for the Indian Institute of Chartered Accountants (ICAI) and CA firms are discussed.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Chartered Accountancy (CA) is among the most difficult professions in India. For many students and graduates aspiring to enter the workforce, becoming a CA is considered the single most challenging career path available to young people in India today. Mastery of the CA syllabus requires sharp intellect, years of tedious work and study, and willpower most of us don't know we have in times of duress (Institute of Chartered Accountants of India (ICAI, 2024) [12]. At the heart of it all are hip articles.

Articleship articles refer to the compulsory in-firm training period that CA students complete by working at firms auditing clients, filing taxes, and preparing to take some of India's most high-pressure exams simultaneously.

For CA students who have passed the Intermediate level examination and registered for Final examinations, the challenge is further compounded. Researchers have described this as the clash of two careers. With articleships and exam-preparation each requiring around 70–80-hour work weeks of their own, CA articles must know how to do two full-time jobs at once, but only have the time, energy, and mental capacity to do one (Khushi Garg, 2024) [10]. The expectations of office life would be enough to drive anyone aspiring to become a CA-licensed professional mad. Hours in the office that can stretch past 8 PM or 10 PM nightly during weekdays and weekends, client demands, adherence to ever-changing regulatory standards, audit responsibilities, and daily expectations from senior CA staff are just some of the pressures facing new CA articles. On top of all this, students must also try to find time to study for the CA Final themselves.

Reports suggest that somewhere around 80%-85% of CA Final students experience clinically significant symptoms of anxiety, depression, and stress. Of students experiencing stress, about ¾ of CA students reported their stress to be extreme at some point in their articleship (CAclubindia, 2024; Khushi Garg, 2024) [4, 10]. These numbers are especially significant when paired with India's recent efforts to highlight workplace mental health. Just this year, Ernst and Young lost an employee, 26-year-old newly graduated CA Anna Sebastian Perayil, to apparent suicide (NBC News, 2024) [21]. This study serves as the first attempt to quantify this pressing issue.

1.1 Background Context

Chartered Accountancy courses in India consist of three levels: Foundation, Intermediate, and Final. Aspiring CAs join firms as articles while completing Intermediate and Final level courses. Final level examinations can only be taken by students who have completed 3 years of articleship. The overall pass percentage for the CA Final exam has remained consistently low, hovering around 10%-25%. The majority of CA articles are between ages 18-26 ("Chartered Accountants face acute mental stress," 2025). This demographic has been shown to experience work-induced stress at significantly higher rates.

The ICAI has previously issued advisories to firms encouraging them to allow articleships to focus on their studies and take care of their mental and physical health. While previous initiatives have focused on adjusting workflow and increasing employees' time away from work, little has been studied about how India's competitive exams may affect student well-being. This study seeks to uncover more about this relationship.

1.2 AIM AND RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The primary aim of this study is to quantitatively measure subjective well-being and daily stress levels among CA article students experiencing dual workload and identify common coping strategies used by the population. The following specific objectives guided this research:

1. To assess subjective well-being and perceived daily stress levels among CA articles experiencing dual workload.
2. To identify common coping strategies used by CA articles.
3. To explore the relationship between dual workload, subjective well-being, daily stress, and coping strategies.
4. To explore the CA Final articles' lived experiences of dual workload through semi-structured interviews.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

2.1 Operational Definitions

2.1.1 Dual Workload

For purposes of this study, dual workload refers to articleship training expectations at CA firms as well as studying for CA Final exams. More specifically, dual workload refers to juggling the cognitive load, time commitments, and emotional investment of two full-time jobs that you cannot completely stop doing when you are doing the other. Dual workload is similar in concept to qualitative descriptions of work-study conflict but differs from regular multitasking due to its intensity and the institutional mandates requiring CA students to experience it.

2.1.2 Subjective Well-Being

Subjective well-being will be measured as positive mental health. Adopting the WHO's (2015) [25] definition of positive mental health, positive mental health was described as: "enjoyment of life, the ability to cope with the normal stresses of life, the ability to feel calm and alert, happy and rested at the same time, as well as being interested in your daily activities." (p. 12). Using Diener's Satisfaction with Life Scale (1984) [8] for purposes of this study, subjective well-being (SWB) will be measured as Satisfaction with Life scores.

2.1.3 Daily Stress

Daily stress was operationalised as participants' appraisal of their day-to-day lives as unpredictable, uncontrollable, and overloaded (Cohen *et al*., 1983; Cohen & Williamson, 1988) [5, 6]. Perceived stress was measured with Cohen's Perceived Stress Scale-10 (PSS-10) (1983), which asks participants about their perceived stress over the past month.

2.1.4 Coping Strategies

Coping strategies were defined as cognitive and behavioural efforts used to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are perceived to be stressful (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) [16]. This includes problem-focused coping strategies, emotion-focused coping strategies, and dysfunctional/avoidant coping.

2.2 RELATED LITERATURE REVIEW

Scientific literature on CA student stress and well-being spans four areas of research: stress and positive mental health in accounting professionals, work-study conflict among professionals, successful interventions for burnout and distress in high-pressure academic programs, and institutional factors influencing CA student mental health.

Of particular relevance is literature directly examining stress in accountants and accounting students. Halim's (2023) research in Indonesia found high levels of stress and burnout in Indonesian accounting students. Stress was also positively correlated with poorer sleep quality and lower self-reported subjective well-being. Prabha and Dhanapal's (2023) [23] study of postgraduate accounting students found that accounting students in India experienced significant depressive symptoms and stress, which were correlated with poor academic performance. Krishnan and Priya (2022) [15] found that stress was positively correlated with Indian CA students' intention to quit their current job.

Malta and Ramirez-Correa's (2022) [17] study found that perceived social support at work and from family members significantly buffered against stress in accountants, and that higher SWB scores mediated this relationship. Bhattacharya *et al*. (2022) [1] found that work stress was negatively correlated with proactive coping and positively correlated with avoidant coping among Indian accounting students. Nguyen *et al*. (2022) [22] found that work-study conflict led to increases in negative coping. Kaur and Singh's (2023) [14] study found that cognitive reappraisal was negatively correlated with burnout and positively correlated with well-being among Indian college students.

Rodrigues, Girija, Pawar, and Shirgaonkar's (2023) [24] bibliometric analysis on stress in accounting found research was largely confined to English-language journals from European, North American, or Australian institutions and that Indian accounting students were statistically underrepresented in existing literature. Molina-Sanchez *et al*.'s (2019) [20] study applied the JD-R Model to professional accountants and found that social support, autonomy, and developmental feedback acted as enough of a protective resource for accountants to experience high well-being despite high job demands.

2.3 Gap In Literature

Four gaps are identified in the research literature. Firstly, there has been limited documentation of how balancing both work-study commitments impacts students facing dual workload demands. Secondly, there has been minimal study measuring positive indicators of SWB. Studies have focused on negative outcomes such as depression and burnout. Thirdly, while Indian scholars have conducted relevant research, most studies have failed to use validated measurement tools. Researchers have used non-standardised instruments to measure well-being. Lastly, researchers have not quantitatively assessed what kinds of coping strategies CA students use most frequently. This study has been designed to fill these four research gaps with a mixed-methods approach.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 RESEARCH DESIGN AND PROCEDURE

A mixed-method design was used. Quantitative data were collected using standardised psychometric measures, and qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews. Data were collected concurrently, but quantitative and qualitative data were analysed separately before being compared and contrasted during the discussion stage (Braun & Clarke, 2006) [2]. This approach allowed for statistical analysis of the relationships between dual workload variables, as well as exploration of individual meaning and experience.

3.2 Participants and Sampling

The population consisted of CA Final articles currently enrolled in articleship in India. Purposeful sampling was primarily used, and snowball sampling was achieved through personal professional networks, CA coaching communities, and CA WhatsApp groups. Candidates were included if they fell within the age range of 21 to 30 years. The sample size for quantitative data was N = 30 participants. Inclusion criteria required participants to be current CA Final articles registered with ICAI and actively studying for CA Final exams at the time of data collection. Exclusion criteria: Participants on examination leave were excluded from the study because they did not experience a dual workload at the time of data collection.

Participants P17 and P23 were selected from the quantitative sample for semi-structured interviews. These candidates were selected due to recording the highest scores on the PSS-10 during the quantitative portion of data collection.

3.3 Measures and Instruments

PSS-10: Perceived Stress Scale-10

The PSS-10 is a 10-item self-report questionnaire that assesses perceptions of stress over the past month. Participants are asked to rate each item on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 0 = never to 4 = very often. Items 4, 5, 7, and 8 are reverse-scored. Scores can range from 0 to 40 with cut-off scores of 0-11, 12-15, 16-20, and 21-40 representing low, average, high, and very high perceived stress, respectively. Cronbach's alpha = .78 to .91 (Cohen *et al*., 1983) [5].

SWLS: Satisfaction With Life Scale

The Satisfaction With Life Scale is a five-item self-report survey that measures cognitive judgments of life satisfaction. Items are measured using a 7-point scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree. Scores range from 5-35, with higher scores indicating higher life satisfaction. Cronbach's alpha = .79 to .89 (Diener *et al*., 1985) [9].

WCQ: Ways of Coping Questionnaire

The Ways of Coping Questionnaire is a 66-item assessment that measures common cognitive and behavioural coping responses. Three subscales measure problem-focused coping, emotion-focused coping, and avoidant coping. Items are measured using a 4-point scale ranging from 0 = does not apply to 3 = applies very much (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) [16].

3.4 Procedure

Participants completed three quantitative measures through an electronic form. Completed forms were scored by the

researcher according to the instrument manuals. Interview candidates P17 and P23 were contacted to schedule a semi-structured interview. Interviews lasted approximately 25-35 minutes and were conducted either in-person or via video call. Interviews were recorded with participant permission and transcribed. Transcripts were then analysed according to Braun and Clarke's (2006) [2] six-phase model of thematic analysis.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

Participants were provided informed consent before collecting data. No identifying information was saved with the data files. Participants were coded using a numeric system. Debriefings were provided to all participants upon completion of the study. Participants were given mental health resources should they require support.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Quantitative Results

4.1.1 PSS-10 Results

The PSS-10 was administered to all 30 participants. Results are presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Perceived Stress Scale (PSS-10) Score Distribution among CA Final Articles (N = 30)

Stress Level	Score Range	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Cumulative %
Low Stress	0–11	0	0%	0%
Average Stress	12–15	3	10%	10%
High Stress	16–20	9	30%	40%
Very High Stress	21–40	18	60%	100%
Total	—	30	100%	—

Note. Mean PSS-10 score = 23.6 (Very High Stress Category). Scoring based on Cohen *et al*. (1983) [5].

Overall, stress levels are critically high, with 60% of participants in the very high stress category and 30% in the high stress category. Zero participants registered low stress. The mean score of 23.6 falls well within the very high stress category and significantly exceeds the normative mean PSS-10 score for adult Indian populations of 13 to 14 (Cohen & Williamson, 1988) [6]. The absence of any participant in the low stress category is the study's most noteworthy finding: low stress levels for CA Final articles appear nearly impossible under current structural conditions.

4.1.2 SWLS Results

Participants' SWLS scores are presented in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWLS) Score Distribution among CA Final Articles (N = 30)

Category	Score Range	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Cumulative %
Extremely Dissatisfied	5–9	4	13.3%	13.3%
Dissatisfied	10–14	8	26.7%	40%
Slightly Below Average	15–19	10	33.3%	73.3%
Average Satisfaction	20–24	6	20%	93.3%
High Satisfaction	25–29	2	6.7%	100%
Very High Satisfaction	30–35	0	0%	—
Total	—	30	100%	—

Note. Mean SWLS Score = 17.8 (Slightly Below Average Life Satisfaction). Scoring based on Diener (1984) [8].

Over 73% of participants fell into the below-average or dissatisfied categories of life satisfaction. No participants achieved very high satisfaction. The mean SWLS score of 17.8 falls into the Slightly Below Average category, indicating that dual workload as currently structured is lowering the overall quality of life for young CA professionals beyond work-specific dissatisfaction.

4.1.3 WCQ Results

Mean coping strategy scores on the WCQ are presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Coping Strategies Mean Scores on the Ways of Coping Questionnaire (N = 30)

Coping Strategy Type	Mean Score	Score Range	Interpretation
Problem-Focused Coping	1.62	0–3	Moderate
Emotion-Focused Coping	2.01	0–3	High
Avoidant Coping	1.88	0–3	Moderate-High

Note. Scores are mean ratings on a 0–3 scale from the Ways of Coping Questionnaire (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) [16]. Higher scores indicate greater reliance on that coping approach.

Emotion-focused coping had the highest mean score (M = 2.01), suggesting CA Final articles predominantly cope by regulating emotional reactions rather than addressing stressors directly. Problem-focused coping had the lowest mean score (M = 1.62). The moderately high avoidant coping score (M = 1.88) is particularly concerning as avoidance compounds academic stressors by increasing backlog and guilt, contributing to what this study terms the Stress-Avoidance-Guilt Cycle.

4.2 Qualitative Results: Thematic Analysis

Interview responses from participants P17 and P23 were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) [2] thematic analysis. Both participants scored in the Very High Stress category on the PSS-10. A total of 12 themes with associated subthemes were identified, presented in Table 4 below.

Table 4: Thematic Analysis: Themes, Subthemes, and Participant Codes (P17 & P23)

Theme	Subtheme	Representative Participant Codes
Role Overload and Time Pressure	Extended working hours; Continuous demands; Lack of rest	"I rarely leave before 8"; "work goes till 10 PM"; "no time to rest"
Work-Study Imbalance	Difficulty managing dual roles; Reduced study efficiency; Academic pressure	"I can't manage both"; "too tired to study"; "exam pressure is always there"
Role Conflict	Competing expectations; External authority pressure	"office deadlines vs exams"; "seniors expect availability"
Chronic Psychological Stress	Persistent anxiety; Mental preoccupation	"I feel anxious most of the time; my mind doesn't switch off"
Emotional Exhaustion and Fatigue	Physical and mental fatigue; Emotional depletion; Irritability	"completely drained"; "I feel blank"; "I get irritated easily"
Sleep and Cognitive Disturbance	Sleep disruption; Difficulty concentrating	"sleep is disturbed"; "can't focus"
Disruption of Personal Life	Reduced social interaction; Limited family engagement	"I hardly meet friends, "no time with family"

Emotional Disconnection	Feeling disconnected; Sense of isolation	"Physically present but mentally elsewhere"; "it feels isolating"
Emotion-Focused Coping	Distraction strategies; Emotional relief attempts	"scrolling"; "listening to music"
Avoidant Coping Patterns	Avoidance of tasks; Temporary coping	"I avoid studying when tired, "helps for some time
Stress-Avoidance-Guilt Cycle	Avoidance due to stress; Guilt; Recurring cycle	"I don't study when stressed" "I feel guilty after wasting time"
Lack of Control and Support	Limited autonomy; Lack of institutional support	"I can't control my schedule; "no flexibility during exams"

Note. Themes derived from thematic analysis of interview transcripts from participants P17 and P23, following Braun & Clarke (2006) [2].

Repeatedly throughout interviews, Role Overload and Time Pressure came up. Both participants cited coming home at 8-10 PM after office as just part of articleship life. When you're racing against the clock like this, there's no downtime between work and study expectations. Time is so structurally scarce that it bleeds into every other source of stress.

Arguably, the most clinically interesting theme was the Stress-Avoidance-Guilt Cycle. Both participants outlined a cycle of avoiding study when stress levels were highest, feeling better for a time, but later experiencing exacerbated guilt and anxiety when their backlog had grown. However, when pressed, both could recognise the self-destructiveness of the cycle but felt trapped in it anyway. This helps explain the pervasive escapism: avoidant coping mechanisms become intertwined with your psychology when you feel like you can't change your situation.

4.3 DISCUSSION

Taken together, results from both quantitative and qualitative components paint a clear picture: workload is too high during CA articleship for most articles to handle. No single theory can perfectly encapsulate the articleship experience, so I discuss three frameworks that collectively cover most major concepts.

First, Kahn *et al*.'s (1964) [13] Organisational Role Stress Theory describes role overload (having too many expectations for the time and energy we have) and role conflict (the incompatibility of two roles that each require your full attention at the same time) as two major causes of stress at work. Articleships have structural elements of both: ICAI expects 21–23-year-olds to be both full-time employees and full-time exam candidates.

The Transactional Model of Lazarus and Folkman (1984) [16] can describe how articles cope with these stressors. If you perceive your stressors as coming from a structurally-linked source that you can do nothing about on an individual level (an accurate appraisal), you will naturally employ more emotion-focused coping, because problem-focused coping would be wasted on issues outside of your control. Higher scores in emotion-focused coping (M = 2.01) versus problem-focused (M = 1.62) shouldn't be taken as a sign that you're weak or lazy; you simply understand your powerlessness at an institutional level.

Lastly, let's discuss the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) Model. According to the JD-R model, added resources can mediate the extreme demands placed on articleship students. Resources include the above-mentioned examination leave, as well as other smaller ones like flexibility in schedules, institution-based mental health resources, and even supervisors who acknowledge the difficulty of balancing both roles. The lack of any substantial resources was what Molina-Sanchez *et al*. (2019) [20] attempted to address in their study; they found that even simple resources like social support, autonomy, and regular developmental feedback were enough to improve the well-being of professional accountants. In short, there is evidence that some resources do work; we just aren't giving them to CA articles.

5. CONCLUSION

This research study aimed to understand the dual workload, subjective well-being, daily stress levels, and coping strategies of 30 CA Final articles in India. Major findings include that all participants rated their perceived stress as either high or very high (M PSS-10 = 23.6) and 73.3% rated their life satisfaction as average or below (M SWLS = 17.8). Emotion-focused coping and Avoidant coping were the most popular coping mechanisms. Problem-focused coping was the least popular coping mechanism. Interview responses were coded into twelve themes, which showed that CA Articles experience similar sources of stress that contribute to their low well-being.

Because participants were all near identical on outcomes (MOST reported high stress), we can deduce that these outcomes are not random; they're the result of our articleship system. A system that asks 20-year-olds to continuously perform at full-time capacity in two different jobs. Organisational role stress theory, the Transactional Model of stress, and the JD-R Model all point to the same solution: we need more resources to meet ICAI demands.

ICAI can use this study to justify instituting mandated rules around minimums: how many weeks of examination leave are we entitled to per year? What are the maximum expected working hours during examination prep time? Do articleships have to offer accommodations? Individual firms can standardise examination leave policies, train managers to recognise and validate the difficulty of balancing work and study, and foster environments where therapy isn't taboo. As for what you can do as an individual, the Stress-Avoidance-Guilt Cycle mentioned in qualitative data is a learned behavioural pattern. Once you recognise it in yourself, you can break the cycle by studying for small amounts of time and relaxing through meditation or box breathing. (Gupta *et al*., 2022) [11] More longitudinal studies, bigger nationally representative samples, intervention studies, and gender disaggregated data can expand upon this study.

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