

Academic Self-Handicapping Among Students: Psychological Factors and Academic Consequences

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Abstract:

Academic self-handicapping is a self-protective behaviour where learners build or claim barriers to academic performance with the aim of preserving their self-esteem and mitigate the psychological cost of potential failure. This narrative review explored the psychological aspects of academic self-handicapping and its consequences on students' academic performance. A review of pertinent literature was conducted using Google Scholar, Scopus, ScienceDirect, APA PsycNet, ResearchGate, and ERIC. Results indicated that fear of failure, self-worth concerns, performance-avoidance goals, academic anxiety, maladaptive perfectionism, procrastination, external locus of control, poor self-regulation and neuroticism are related to academic self-handicapping. While academic self-handicapping might provide temporary relief from feelings of failure and inadequacy, it ultimately is associated with poorer academic outcomes, lower academic motivation, and low engagement. Additionally, it is related to increased levels of academic stress and anxiety, poor academic adjustment and academic burnout. The review highlights the self-perpetuating nature of academic self-handicapping, as fear of failure leads to avoidance, less preparation, poor performance and increased academic self-handicapping. Therefore, academic self-handicapping can be reduced through the promotion of learning environments which promote self-regulation, autonomy, resilience, positive accomplishment goals and healthy attitudes toward mistakes. Using early detection, self-determination treatments and appropriate counselling can help further equip students with adaptive academic behaviours.

Keywords: *Academic Self-Handicapping; Psychological factors; Academic performance; Fear of failure; Academic motivation.*

Introduction

Academic success is influenced by students' cognitive abilities as well as their psychological beliefs, emotional experiences, and behavioral strategies. Academic self-handicapping is one such maladaptive tactic, which is a self-protective tactic used by students who don't think they can succeed and want to maintain their self-worth and self-image, in anticipation of possible poor academic outcomes (Schwinger et al., 2022). Self-handicapping encompasses a range of behavioural patterns whereby people create or impose barriers to success, that enable them to claim credit for their success but blame external factors for failure rather than their own lack of ability (Berglas & Jones, 1978; Jones & Berglas, 1978; Goodarznaseri et al., 2025). Rooted in attributional and self-worth perspectives, self-handicapping serves as a coping strategy that helps people to protect their perceived competence and self-worth when confronted with performance-related threats (Jones & Berglas, 1978; Török et al., 2018). Academic self-handicapping refers to behaviours by which students create or claim obstacles to academic

performance with the intention of maintaining their self-esteem and self-image when anticipating unfavourable outcomes (Gadbois & Sturgeon, 2011; Schwinger et al., 2014; Schwinger et al., 2022). Self-handicapping behaviours, such as procrastination, diminished effort, withdrawal from academic tasks, insufficient preparation, and creating excuses for poor academic performance, can occur within educational contexts (Urdan & Midgley, 2001; Martin et al., 2001; Schwinger et al., 2014). Such behaviours often have an impact on effective learning and resilience and hinder academic achievement, although they can provide temporary safety for self-esteem.

Research indicates that a number of psychological factors have a role in establishing and maintaining the practice of academic self-handicapping. These comprise anxiety, performance-avoidance goal orientation, procrastination, fear of failure and the desire to maintain one's sense of self-worth (Midgley et al. 1996; Urdan, 2004). In order to escape unfavourable assessments and maintain their self-esteem, students who feel threatened by academic situations or who have self-doubt tend to use self-

handicapping techniques (Schwinger et al., 2022). These strategies might be emotionally rewarding in the short term, but can lead to negative patterns of thinking and behaviour.

Academic self-handicapping has been related to a number of adverse academic consequences over the years. Several studies (Akça, 2012; Urdan, 2004; Urdan & Midgley, 2001) have concluded that students who self-handicap, typically exhibit lower academic performance, lower motivation, ineffective study skills, low engagement in the classroom, and low persistence. Moreover, although the self-handicapping behaviours help to maintain students' self-esteem in the short term, chronic use of self-handicapping can lead to poorer academic achievement and poor self-confidence, and hinder students' ability to use achievement-oriented behaviours and adaptive coping strategies (Midgley et al., 1996; Martin et al., 2001).

In order to support students' academic performance and well-being, educators, counsellors, and researchers must comprehend academic self-handicapping due to its substantial psychological and pedagogical repercussions. Therefore, this review based study aims to explore the psychological factors contributing to academic self-handicapping among students and examine the academic consequences associated with self-handicapping behaviors among students.

Objectives

1. To explore the psychological factors contributing to academic self-handicapping among students.
2. To explore the academic consequences associated with academic self-handicapping behaviors among students.

Methodology

This study adopted a narrative review approach to synthesize existing literature on academic self-handicapping among students. Relevant studies were identified through databases such as Google Scholar, Scopus, ScienceDirect, APA PsycNet and ERIC using keywords related to academic self-handicapping, psychological factors, and academic outcomes. The reviewed literature was thematically synthesized to identify major psychological factors associated with academic self-handicapping and its reported academic consequences, without collecting or analyzing primary data. Studies focusing on students'

self-handicapping behaviors, contributing psychological factors, and academic consequences were reviewed to develop an understanding of the existing research findings.

Theoretical Background

Academic self-handicapping is the employment of barriers or actions that can shield students' perceptions of their own abilities by offering an explanation for potential academic failure (Berglas & Jones, 1978; Jones & Berglas, 1978; Feick & Rhodewalt, 1997; Urdan & Midgley, 2001). Procrastination, low effort, poor preparation, and avoidance of academic assignments are examples of self-handicapping in academic contexts that can affect students' performance (Higgins et al., 2013; Urdan & Midgley, 2001). From Covington's Self-Worth Theory, students' academic success is closely related to their perceived ability and self-worth; therefore, anticipated failure may threaten their sense of worth and motivate self-protective behavior (Covington, 1984, 1992).

A previous study has demonstrated that academic self-handicapping among university students is related to psychological factors such as procrastination, test anxiety, self-esteem, and self-compassion (Barutçu Yıldırım & Demir, 2020). Learners exhibiting stronger performance-avoidance goals have been observed to utilise self-handicapping more frequently, while task-oriented goals are linked to less self-handicapping, which makes achievement motivation important (Midgley & Urdan, 2001). Attribution Theory further explains how students interpret the reasons of academic achievement and setbacks, particularly through factors such as ability and effort, and how these attributions influence expectations, emotions, and subsequent behavior (Feick & Rhodewalt, 1997; Weiner, 1985; Török et al., 2018).

As a result, students may defend their academic self-worth by attributing low academic performance to poor effort or preparation rather than viewing it as a reflection of their ability. Research reveals that academic self-handicapping is correlated with lower academic results and other unfavourable educational outcomes, even while it may offer temporary psychological comfort (Zuckerman et al., 1998; Schwinger et al., 2014). Therefore, Weiner's Attribution Theory, Covington's Self-Worth Theory, and Self Handicapping by Berglas and Jones (1978), offers a thorough theoretical framework for

comprehending how psychological elements contribute to academic self-handicapping and how such academic self-handicapping may affect students' academic outcomes.

I. Psychological factors contributing to academic self-handicapping among students.

Academic self-handicapping is a self-protective measure that involves the deliberate enactment or perceived barriers that might hinder students' performance in school tasks and, thereby, help to protect a positive psychological self-image and minimize the impact of possible failure on the student's self-esteem (Török et al., 2018; Török et al., 2022). There are several psychological factors that may result in the adoption of academic self-handicapping behaviours, including fear of failure, and fixed mindset (Török et al., 2022). The psychological factors can cause students to engage in behaviors that offer temporary relief for their self-esteem, such as procrastination, diminished effort, and excuses, which have adverse impact on learning, motivation, and learning outcomes (Schwinger et al., 2022; Török et al., 2022).

1. Fear of Failure

Academic self-handicapping is an important psychological problem that occurs among students, and one of the important sources leading to this phenomenon is fear of failure. Fear of failure may be a significant reason why students adopt academic self-handicapping. Students who are concerned that failure may indicate low ability may procrastinate, reduce their effort, or create other impediments to maintain their self-esteem and explain low academic outcomes (Duru et al., 2024; Fakhri et al., 2025; Schwinger et al., 2022). Fear of failure is closely related to performance-avoidance goals, which involve students' concerns about negative evaluation, appearing incompetent, or being judged unfavorably by others (Conroy & Elliot, 2004; Giel et al., 2020; Elliot & Church, 1997). Self-protective behavior and academic self-handicapping responses have been associated with increased fear of failure in that students use these behaviors with the aim of maintaining their sense of self-worth and minimizing the negative emotional reactions that might occur in the event of failure (Urduan & Midgley, 2001; Chen et al., 2009). Fear of failure is a key contributor to academic self-handicapping, and greater fear of

failure is correlated with higher levels of self-handicapping behaviors (Fakhri et al., 2025).

2. Self-Esteem and Self-Worth Concerns

Academic self-handicapping is linked to self-esteem concerns and self-worth issues, as students' self-worth is connected to their academic performance, failure may be viewed as undermining their self-worth. According to self-worth theory, if a student is challenged in the way of achieving his or her competence, he or she becomes defensive and adopts or activates strategies to protect self-worth (Covington, 1992). Educational environments are an environment where students may be concerned that their poor performance will be interpreted as their limited ability and may be inclined to adopt self-handicapping behaviors, such as procrastination or simply doing less (Midgley & Urduan, 1995). Lower self-esteem level and less stable self-esteem were associated with greater academic self-handicapping (Kärchner et al., 2021). Learners who have lower self-esteem and higher internalized shame may also show higher self-handicapping behaviors (Bae et al., 2022).

3. Avoidance Achievement Goals

Performance-avoidance goals are related to academic self-handicapping, as students with these goals try to prevent receiving negative evaluations and appearing incompetent. These students are more likely to avoid learning and improvement; they tend to take a defensive approach. There is considerable evidence that students who have a performance-avoidance or mastery avoidance orientation exhibit self-handicapping behaviors (Chen et al., 2009; Urduan & Midgley, 2001; Urduan, 2004). Students with avoidance achievement goals tend to try to avoid negative judgments by engaging in self-protective strategies like procrastination, lowering their effort, and making excuses for their poor performance (Midgley & Urduan, 1995; Martin et al., 2003). Avoidance goal orientation was shown to make significant contribution to academic self-handicapping (Ghablan & Alanezi, 2023), whereas academic self-handicapping was observed as having positive relationships with performance-avoidance and mastery-avoidance goals (Goodarznaseri et al., 2025). Thus, avoidance achievement goals represent an important psychological factor contributing to academic self-handicapping among students (Urduan & Midgley, 2001; Chen et al., 2009).

4. Academic Stress and Test Anxiety

Academic and test anxiety are factors that lead to self-handicapping, which heightens students' anxiety about being evaluated and failure. Students with high anxiety can opt for avoidance activity, e.g., procrastination, and less preparation of work when faced with academic difficulties which may undermine their self-esteem (Awwad et al., 2022; Ferrari & Tice, 2000; Jenifer et al., 2022). Test anxiety and fear of failure have been identified as key predictors of self-handicapping behaviors, which students employ to cope with challenges to their academic self-worth (Barutçu Yıldırım & Demir, 2020; Harris et al., 1986; Chen et al., 2009). Higher levels of self-handicapping were associated with greater academic anxiety (Jia et al., 2021). Cognitive test anxiety was linked to academic self-handicapping, which was associated with decreased academic performance (Cassady et al., 2024).

5. Perfectionism

Perfectionism is one of the important psychological factors that is related with academic self-handicapping, especially when it is in a maladaptive form. Maladaptive perfectionism characterised by setting excessively demanding standards on oneself and may be seen as threats to self-worth. This leads to them being able to procrastinate, avoid work and diminish their efforts to avoid negative judgment. Negative perfectionism is positively related to self-handicapping (Firoozi et al., 2016), and perfectionism has been found to predict self-handicapping behaviours (Stewart & De George-Walker, 2014). Individuals with high self-oriented perfectionism may employ self-handicapping as a self-protective strategy (Hobden & Pliner, 1995). Likewise, perfectionism has been positively associated with self-handicapping (Karner-Huțuleac, 2014), and negative perfectionism has been reported to show a significant positive correlation with self-handicapping (Akar et al., 2018). Maladaptive perfectionism showed a stronger correlation with academic self-handicapping (Alodat et al., 2020). As a whole, these findings indicate that perfectionistic tendencies, especially fear of making errors and negative self-evaluations, might make students more susceptible to academic self-handicapping.

6. Maladaptive behavioral tendencies (e.g., procrastination and effort withdrawal)

Probably the most prevalent form of academic self-handicapping is procrastination. Students may put off academic activities to provide external reasons for possible failure to protect their self-esteem (Ferrari, 1991; Schwinger et al., 2022). Procrastination can thus be interpreted as a self-handicapping behaviour; whereby students may not attribute their lack of success to lack of skill but to lack of time. Academic failure and self-handicapping have been consistently related to procrastination, particularly during evaluative tasks (Ferrari & Tice, 2000; Klassen et al., 2008). Self-handicapping also has been shown to be positively correlated with procrastination (Akça, 2012; Jia et al., 2021; Karataş & Akar, 2025) and it has been found to increase with procrastination (Barutçu Yıldırım & Demir, 2020). According to the study of (Pamuk, 2022), students who showed greater academic procrastination also showed a greater tendency in regard to academic self-handicapping. Therefore, procrastination and effort withdrawal can be a form of academic self-handicapping because it can make it more difficult for students to achieve success in school and give them an excuse for failure.

7. External Locus of Control

External locus of control describes the tendency to perceive that one's academic failure or success is due to other sources, such as luck, teachers, or circumstances, rather than one's own efforts (Rotter, 1966; Mathur, 2014; Kirkpatrick et al., 2008). It has exhibited a positive correlation with academic self-handicapping implying that learners with external locus of control tend to engage in academic self-handicapping (Akça, 2012; Akın, 2011; Khosla, 2025).

8. Poor Self-Regulation Skills

Another psychological factor is poor self-regulation which is involved in academic self-handicapping. Self-regulation is the learners' potential to effectively direct their motivation, feelings, time and learning strategies. Academic self-handicapping is significantly and inversely related to overall self-regulated learning strategies (Azeem, & Zubair, 2021; Thomas, & Gadbois, 2007). Higher academic self-regulation was significantly related to reduced academic self-handicapping (Khanmohammadi et al., 2024).

9. Neuroticism

Neuroticism may be an important correlate of academic self-handicapping. In the classroom setting, learners exhibiting high levels of neuroticism scores may be more susceptible to anxiety, feelings of self-consciousness, emotional instability and susceptibility to failure, which may contribute to increased academic self-handicapping behaviors as a self-protective measure. More self-handicapping has been linked to higher levels of neuroticism among learners (Ross et al., 2002). Studies confirmed a strong positive association between neuroticism and the self-handicapping tendency (Njoroge et al., 2023; Schwinger et al., 2022). An increased level of neuroticism may contribute to a greater likelihood of engaging in self-handicapping (Nosenko et al., 2014). Academic self-handicapping is determined by a mix of psychological factors that affect perceptions of failure, competence, and self-worth. Students might be inclined toward self-protective behaviours instead of actively addressing academic problems due to fear of failure, low self-esteem, avoidance goals, anxiety, maladaptive perfectionism, procrastination, external locus of control, poor self-regulation, and neuroticism. These strategies might help to temporarily stave off feelings of failure or inadequacy for students; however, they can be detrimental to motivation, learning and academic success.

II. Academic consequences associated with academic self-handicapping behaviours among students.

1. Reduced Academic Achievement and Decline in Effective Learning

Academic self-handicapping has been negatively linked to students' academic achievement as it is linked with less effort, less preparation or less effective learning actions. Self-handicapping students might underperform due to creating obstacles to successful performance and maintaining their self-image instead of enhancing it (Urdan & Midgley, 2001). Academic performance has been shown to be poorer among high self-handicappers (Javanmard et al., 2012; Zuckerman et al., 1998). High level of self-handicapping is also linked to weak test performance and poor study skills that can have academic outcomes (Gadbois & Sturgeon, 2011; Schwinger et al., 2014). A study by (Cassady et al., 2024) revealed that intolerance of uncertainty increased test anxiety, which encouraged self-handicapping and was linked to lower GPA. Academic achievement and self-

handicapping showed a negative correlation (Karataş & Akar, 2025).

Academic self-handicapping is linked to ineffective learning behaviors, reduced study effort and procrastination. Students that self-handicap tend to procrastinate, use superficial learning strategies, and do less well academically (Akça, 2012; Ferrari & Tice, 2000; Gadbois & Sturgeon, 2011). Therefore, academic self-handicapping can result in procrastination, decrease in study effort and poor study strategies, which can result in a decrease in overall learning effectiveness of students.

2. Decreased Academic Motivation and Engagement

Academic self-handicapping has an adverse effect on motivation and engagement in learning because it takes away the focus on learning and brings the focus on failure and self-esteem. It weakens academic motivation and efforts. Research consistently indicates that academic self-handicapping reduces academic engagement and is correlated with lower achievement motivation (Mostafavi & Khalatbari, 2024; Omari & Atoum, 2023; Udo & Emere, 2025).

3. Increased Academic Stress and Anxiety

Academic self-handicapping can help individuals feel less failure in the moment, but may contribute to heightened academic stress and anxiety in the long run. Students who tend not to prepare or to be inhibited by themselves are under more pressure because they know that they are not at their potential and they are not prepared. Self-handicapping has been related to increased test anxiety, poor adjustment, negative focus and poor academic performance (Gadbois & Sturgeon, 2011; Zuckerman et al., 1998). This can result in a chain of negative effects, with anxiety leading to further self-handicapping. Increased tendencies towards self-handicapping are related with greater vulnerability to depression, anxiety, and stress among students (Sahranç, 2011). A study by (Jia et al., 2021) revealed a positive association between academic self-handicapping and academic anxiety. Another study by (Karataş & Akar, 2025) reported a positive association between self-handicapping and test anxiety.

4. Impaired Academic Adjustment and Long-Term Educational consequences

Severe academic self-handicapping can be an impediment to academic adjustment, in that students may not be able to deal effectively with challenges. Pupils who employ defensive or avoidant strategies can struggle to maintain efforts, to meet objectives, and to adjust to difficult learning environments. People who had high self-handicapping also experienced poorer adjustment over time (Zuckerman et al., 1998). Previous research has indicated that chronic self-handicapping has been found to contribute to lower levels of academic behaviors (Urđan & Midgley, 2001; Schwinger et al., 2014). The use of self-handicapping as a means of task avoidance may diminish students' intrinsic interest in learning and interfere with their academic adaptation (Han, 2024). Academic self-handicapping was linked to reduced academic engagement and greater negative achievement emotions, which may adversely affect students' academic well-being over time (Goodarznaseri et al., 2025).

5. Academic Burnout:

Academic self-handicapping was shown to be a significant factor in the academic burnout in terms of the negative achievement emotions (e.g., fear of failure, shame, and anxiety) and academic burnout in general (Goodarznaseri et al., 2025). Self-handicapping was positively related to emotional exhaustion (Akin, 2012). Higher levels of academic self-handicapping were significantly related to greater academic burnout (Ye et al., 2026).

Overall, academic self-handicapping can have several negative consequences for students' academic functioning and well-being. It has been associated with lower academic performance, less motivation and engagement, poor study habits, increased stress and anxiety, poor academic adjustment and higher risk of academic burnout. Academic self-handicapping may be temporarily helpful in preventing failure, but the continued use of this strategy may reinforce a cycle of poor preparation, decreased performance, and increase in academic struggles.

Discussion

The literature review reveals that academic self-handicapping is a complex phenomenon associated with a number of psychological factors and having significant academic consequences for students. Fear

of failure, self-worth concerns, avoidance achievement goals, academic anxiety, maladaptive perfectionism, procrastination, external locus of control, poor self-regulation, and neuroticism were identified as important factors linked to academic self-handicapping in the reviewed studies (Akar et al., 2018; Akça, 2012; Alodat et al., 2020; Chen et al., 2009; Fakhri et al., 2025; Ghablan & Alanezi, 2023; Karner-Huțuleac, 2014; Khosla, 2025; Nosenko et al., 2014; Pamuk, 2022; Schwinger et al., 2022; Török et al., 2022; Urđan & Midgley, 2001). These factors imply that students may tend to adopt self-handicapping strategies when they feel threatened by academic failure in relation to concerns about their competence, self-esteem, and self-worth. Self-handicapping can thus serve as a protective behavior in the short-term, enabling the student to explain poor performance in terms of factors beyond his or her control or under his or her control (Midgley & Urđan, 1995; Urđan & Midgley, 2001).

As indicated in the literature, there are also a variety of negative academic consequences associated with academic self-handicapping. Self-handicapping is correlated with increased procrastination, decreased effort, ineffective study habits, decreased academic motivation, increased test anxiety, and decreased academic performance (Cassady et al., 2024; Gadbois & Sturgeon, 2011; Karataş & Akar, 2025; Schwinger et al., 2014; Udo & Emere, 2025). (Akin, 2012; Goodarznaseri et al., 2025; Sahrañç, 2011; Ye et al., 2026; Zuckerman et al., 1998) also identified a relationship between self-handicapping and academic stress and anxiety, academic adjustment problems and academic burnout. Thus, although academic self-handicapping might temporarily buffer students from negative self-evaluation and feelings of failure, repeated use could lead to a vicious cycle whereby self-handicapping results in poorer academic performance, which may increase fear of failure and additional self-handicapping.

In general, the reviewed literature indicates that the academic self-handicapping is an academic and psychological phenomenon. The relationship of students' self-competence beliefs, emotional states, achievement orientations, and behaviour appears to play a significant role in the development and persistence of self-handicapping behavior. Thus, environmental factors that enhance self-regulation, foster adaptive achievement motives, diminish fear of failure, and foster more positive self-concept beliefs

may facilitate replacing self-protective behaviours with more positive achievement strategies.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this review shows that academic self-handicapping has an association with multiple psychological factors and several adverse academic consequences. It might initially prevent student self-esteem from being threatened by failure, but extended habits of academic self-handicapping can negatively affect student motivation, learning, achievement and academic well-being. It is therefore significant to be aware of these contributing factors to develop supportive education approaches that will facilitate students' adaptive coping to academic challenges and effective learning behaviours instead of academic self-handicapping.

Educational Implications

Creating a learning environment that fosters confidence, resiliency, autonomy, and good learning habits can help minimize academic self-handicapping. Important elements for teachers include facilitating learning and growth, rather than competition, promoting effort and persistence, and fostering self-regulation, time management and coping skills. Counselling and resiliency-building programs should be available to help students with feelings of anxiety, low self-esteem, or fear of failure. Self-determination skills training has also been found to diminish self-handicapping behaviours (Rahdar & Sargolzai, 2025) and appropriate conditions for students' rational-emotive growth can enhance academic involvement and academic self-handicapping control (Yazdizadeh et al., 2023). The teachers need to establish learning-goal-oriented classrooms in which mistakes are considered as a part of development, understanding of the subject is prioritized above memorization, and effort is appreciated (Török et al., 2018). Encouraging student independence and autonomy may reduce self-handicapping and the need to manage their self-image (Knee & Zuckerman, 1998; Lewis & Neighbors, 2005). It is particularly crucial to provide early prevention for children and school-age learners because self-handicapping may hinder achievement and contribute to a lifelong withdrawal from learning activities, making it important for parents and teachers to discourage such behaviours (Török et al., 2018; Izadpanah & Charmi, 2022).

Limitations

This study is a literature based study, therefore the results of the study will depend on the availability of literature, quality of literature and the extent of previous research conducted on academic self-handicapping among students. The study is based on secondary data and therefore is not a study of students' direct data, and this may result in a lack of direct data of their experiences, motivations and underlying motives for academic self-handicapping behavior. The focus of the review is mainly on the psychological factors and academic outcomes, whereas other underlying factors which are also very important, such as family expectations, peer relationships, classroom environment, institutional factors, etc., need further study. Moreover, the lack of coverage in the present review might have overlooked some psychological factors associated with academic self-handicapping.

Suggestions for Further Studies

Future studies should consider using a longitudinal design to investigate the development and growth of academic self-handicapping, as well as examining the effects of academic self-handicapping over time. Further research is required at various levels of education and in a variety of cultures to enhance the generalizability of results. In addition, the effects of other factors such as resilience, emotional intelligence, personality traits and academic stress need to be investigated further. In addition, reviews which are more thorough, such as systematic reviews and meta-analyses, are required to establish the broader range of psychological factors that lead to academic self-handicapping and to understand how this relates to academic performance, academic motivation, psychological well-being and other academic outcomes. More research and intervention studies regarding strategies in increasing self-efficacy, reducing fear of failure and improving adaptive learning behaviors are required. Other psychological factors may also be important and should be addressed in future studies. Furthermore, a mixed-method research approach can be used to provide a multidimensional understanding of students' experiences and motives of students regarding academic self-handicapping.

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