

Self-defeating strategies among master's and doctoral students in the field of business

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Abstract

Objective: To investigate the self-defeating strategies used by graduate students in the business field during the phases of completing coursework and writing dissertations or theses.

Method: Application of the Self-Defeating Strategies Scale (EEAPREJ) by Boruchovitch et al. (2022) on a sample of 528 current students and graduates of stricto sensu graduate programs in Public Administration, Business Administration, and Accounting, using Confirmatory Factor Analysis and Structural Equation Modeling.

Results: Although most students denied engaging in self-harming behaviors, practices such as procrastination and sabotage frequently occur at critical moments in their academic training, especially during the preparation of dissertations and theses. The factor structure of the scale was confirmed, revealing three main dimensions: procrastination, hyperactivity, and sabotage. The need for 172 institutional interventions that promote psychosocial support was emphasized, aiming to enhance well-being and mitigate the negative impacts of self-harming strategies on academic performance.

Contributions: The findings contribute to understanding the challenges faced by students and to the development of mental health and psychosocial care policies, broadening the understanding of patterns of self-harming activities and their implications for the academic and professional development of graduate students. By highlighting that self-harming strategies persist, even among experienced individuals, the study points to the need for institutional interventions aimed at promoting self-regulation skills, mental health, and stress management, thereby mitigating the impacts of these behaviors on academic performance. Self-defeating behaviors are observed during the writing of theses and dissertations, precisely at the moment when all personal and financial investments have already been made.

Keywords: Self-sabotage; Self-harming strategies; Graduate studies; Psychosocial care.

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Introduction

The academic journey presents challenges that often lead students to adopt self-defeating strategies—that is, strategies that hinder their performance (Sternberg, 2013; Clarke & MacCann, 2016; Ruben-Clapper, 2021) and result in behaviors that limit academic success (Decker & Mitchell, 2016; Boruchovitch et al., 2022). Research in the academic context shows that college students may exhibit self-defeating strategies, such as: abusing alcohol and drugs, procrastinating, completing assignments at the last minute, reporting headaches, feeling nervous, exhibiting hyperactivity, and self-sabotaging, among others (Ganda & Boruchovitch, 2016; Zanatto, 2007).

Clarke and MacCann (2016) argue that the use of these self-defeating strategies is closely linked to the process of self-evaluation. When individuals perceive themselves as under judgment, they create obstacles to explain their unsatisfactory results, such as “I failed because I didn’t sleep well,” rather than attributing them to a supposed lack of ability, such as “I failed because I am incompetent.” Thus, by adopting justifications that go beyond the limits of their control, they avoid feelings of shame or humiliation in front of others (Boruchovitch et al., 2022; Melhem, 2022).

Berglas and Jones (1988), pioneers in the study of these strategies, observed that students who resort to self-defeating behaviors are generally those most concerned about their performance. By doubting their own chances of success, they end up creating barriers that compromise or hinder their own progress. This dynamic, described as “self-handicapping,” not only limits academic performance but also compromises the development of skills for long-term success. In addition, Schwinger et al. (2014) found evidence that younger students tend to exhibit a stronger relationship between self-handicapping strategies and academic performance, due to less experience in dealing with failure.

The study by Wyse et al. (2023) delves deeper into this discussion by analyzing how self-handicapping strategies affect the academic trajectory of undergraduate students, particularly in the business field. The research highlights that these strategies, often associated with high levels of stress and anxiety, have a significant impact not only on immediate academic performance but also on broader aspects, such as commitment to the program and involvement in extracurricular activities. These findings reinforce the importance of investigating the impacts of these self-defeating strategies more broadly, not only on academic performance but also on how they shape personal and professional development throughout the university experience.

Although a significant portion of the literature has focused on undergraduate students, more recent studies indicate

that these behaviors also take on particular relevance in *stricto sensu* graduate programs. Gross et al. (2024), for example, point out that little is still known about self-defeating strategies among doctoral students and show that more dysfunctional profiles are associated with higher levels of depressive symptoms, imposter syndrome, low self-esteem, low self-efficacy, impulsivity, neuroticism, and rumination. Similarly, Falconer and Djokic (2019) observe that persistence in doctoral programs cannot be understood solely through academic, institutional, or financial factors, as psychological factors linked to self-efficacy and self-defeating strategies must also be considered.

The relevance of studying these behaviors in *stricto sensu* programs stems from the fact that master's and doctoral programs involve long-term tasks, greater demands for autonomy, prolonged academic writing, frequent exposure to formal and informal evaluations, and, in many cases, balancing academic, professional, and personal demands. Under these conditions, task postponement (procrastination), withdrawal of effort, and other forms of self-protection tend to take on distinct characteristics.

In the business education setting, the examination of these strategies takes on additional dimensions, as their effects can extend beyond immediate academic performance and impact students' educational trajectories, engagement with the program, and, in the future, their interpersonal skills, decision-making, and professional performance. Studies conducted outside the university setting indicate that persistent patterns of self-defeating strategies can compromise outcomes, work relationships, and team performance, which reinforces the relevance of investigating this phenomenon even during academic training (Wyse et al., 2023; Kräkel & Müller, 2012; Irlenbusch et al., 2007; Sappington & Weisman, 2004; Goering, 2014; Jager, 2018).

While there is already evidence at the undergraduate level that self-defeating strategies negatively affect academic trajectories in a broader sense (Wyse et al., 2023), in the *stricto sensu* context, and specifically in the business field, it remains less clear how these strategies are distributed among students as they fulfill curricula, write their dissertation or thesis, and in the period immediately following graduation. Thus, the research question guiding this study is: what self-defeating strategies do *stricto sensu* graduate students in the business field use during the phases of fulfilling curricular credits and writing dissertations or theses?

Thus, the objective of this study is to investigate which self-defeating strategies are used by *stricto sensu* graduate students in the business field during the phases of fulfilling curricular credits and writing dissertations or theses. By achieving this objective, the study aims to provide empirical evidence that can inform institutional

interventions focused on preventing and addressing dysfunctional academic behaviors that negatively impact student performance and the quality of graduate programs.

Self-defeating behaviors remain poorly understood. Research describes situations in which people adopt this strategy and observations of how it is perceived. However, these studies provide verbal descriptions and do not specify the cognitive processes underlying human behavior represented by the mental mechanisms that mediate and shape attention, reasoning, and decision-making in the teaching-learning relationship (Xiang et al., 2026).

This study distinguishes itself by identifying and analyzing the self-defeating strategies adopted by business students at different stages of their academic journey. The findings will help identify the moments in academic training most likely to trigger unproductive behaviors. By understanding the self-defeating strategies of these phases, it is possible to suggest institutional actions that minimize academic distress, which can lead to dropout, poor performance, low-quality academic output, and high levels of stress. Furthermore, the study has the potential to reveal at which points in academic life self-defeating strategies most affect the performance of students in *stricto sensu* graduate programs in the business field in Brazil.

2 Self-defeating strategies in the academic trajectory

Self-defeating strategies have been understood as actions, choices, or claims mobilized prior to evaluative situations with the function of shifting the explanation for a potential failure from personal ability to internal or external obstacles, thereby preserving the individual's perception of competence and self-esteem (Berglas & Jones, 1978; Clarke & MacCann, 2016; Török et al., 2019). In attributional terms, this is a mechanism that allows, in the event of failure, for poor performance to be attributed to circumstantial conditions and, in the event of success, for the interpretation of merit to be expanded because success was achieved despite the created or alleged obstacle (Berglas & Jones, 1978; Boruchovitch et al., 2022).

In the educational literature, self-defeating strategies are not limited to a single behavior; they can manifest as procrastination, withdrawal of effort, inattention, feigning physical or emotional symptoms, and creating conditions that hinder performance (Schwinger et al., 2014; Török et al., 2019). Although these strategies may offer immediate psychological protection, their recurring effects tend to be detrimental, as they are associated with poorer performance, reduced intrinsic motivation, diminished satisfaction with one's own competence, and the perpetuation of

cycles of impaired self-regulation (Schwinger et al., 2014; Zuckerman & Tsai, 2005).

Recent literature has focused on developing effective metrics to measure self-handicapping strategies in the academic setting. For example, Kaur and Raji (2022) developed the Self-Handicapping Scale (SHS) and identified two dimensions in the Indian context, termed "claim" and "behavioral." The first addresses emotional factors that avoid the risk of failure, while the second involves physical symptoms or illnesses as means of avoiding task completion.

In turn, Boruchovitch et al. (2022) constructed the Scale of Self-Handicapping Strategies (EEAPREJ) to address common situations in the academic environment and applied it to undergraduate students from different universities in Brazil. The results indicated that students use self-defeating strategies, such as: distraction in the classroom, poor time management for schoolwork, failure to complete activities recommended by professors, skipping classes, reporting physical and psychological symptoms, and sleep deprivation on the eve of exams.

However, these two scales have not yet been applied to graduate students at the master's and doctoral levels. These students frequently face challenges that may lead to the adoption of self-defeating strategies. According to Santos et al. (2015), student adaptation in *stricto sensu* graduate programs involves personal, relational, and institutional factors. The first group (personal) covers students' physical and psychological well-being, as they are often considered a vulnerable population due to high stress levels. The second (relational) pertains to the process of peer integration, since this period is characterized by dependence and the development of bonds with others, such as lab colleagues, professors, advisors, and so on. The third group (institutional) addresses specific demands of the university context, ranging from strict deadlines to frequent exposure of their skills (Santos et al., 2015).

Recent studies suggest that these strategies are linked to specific motivational and emotional antecedents. Ferradás et al. (2017) associate self-defeating strategies and defensive pessimism with motivational profiles in which performance goals—particularly approach and avoidance goals—take center stage. Yıldırım and Demir (2020), in turn, show that procrastination, test anxiety, self-esteem, and self-compassion contribute to explaining self-defeating strategies in college students. In a similar vein, Lee et al. (2022) observed that different combinations of self-esteem level, self-esteem stability, and internalized shame produce significant differences in self-defeating behaviors, indicating that the protection of self-image plays a relevant role in this phenomenon.

Strictly speaking, this debate needs to be linked to the literature on psychological distress. Gross et al. (2024) show that more dysfunctional profiles of procrastination among doctoral students are associated with higher levels of depressive symptoms, rumination, low self-esteem, and low self-efficacy. In a study on graduate accounting programs, Nganga et al. (2023) highlight that conflicts between academic life, work, and personal responsibilities can lead to significant burnout, especially in highly demanding contexts. Along the same lines, Falconer and Djokic (2019) note that psychological factors need to be given greater consideration in studies of doctoral retention. Taken together, these findings indicate that self-defeating strategies cannot be interpreted solely as failures of individual organization, but also as defensive responses to evaluative environments marked by pressure, psychological distress, and weakened self-regulation.

In the field of Business, this examination takes on additional significance. Wyse et al. (2023) show that, among students in this field, self-defeating strategies affect the academic trajectory in a broader sense, impacting commitment to the program, engagement in academic activities, and other elements of their education. Thus, investigating self-harming strategies among graduate students in Business allows for the articulation of three dimensions that have yet to be explored together: the *stricto sensu* context, academic mental health, and the effects of these behaviors on the educational trajectory.

3 Methodology

This research is descriptive, survey-based, and quantitative in approach, involving the collection and analysis of primary data.

The sample consisted of 528 students and graduates of *stricto sensu* graduate programs in the fields of Public Administration, Business Administration, and Accounting, from Brazilian public and private institutions. The selection of the sample considered criteria of accessibility and voluntariness. Participants were invited to take part in the study through electronic invitations sent to the email addresses registered with the academic offices of the graduate programs.

The list of participants was compiled using the databases available on the website of the Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel (CAPES), based on students who were actively enrolled in the database in 2024. The study included students at different stages of graduate school, such as those fulfilling course requirements, writing a dissertation or thesis, and graduates from the past two years, providing a comprehensive view of the academic experience at different points in their educational journey.

Data collection was conducted in February 2025 using the Microsoft Forms® platform, with voluntary participation and without any promise of reward or benefit. The instrument used for data collection was the Scale of Self-Defeating Strategies (EEAPREJ), developed and validated by Boruchovitch et al. (2022), consisting of 19 items that assess strategies related to procrastination, self-sabotage, and hyperactivity. Participants were asked to rate how well each strategy described them using a four-point Likert scale, where (1) corresponded to "Doesn't apply to me at all," (2) "Has little to do with me," (3) "Describes me well," and (4) "Describes me very well," with the absence of a neutral option to encourage a more definitive expression of opinion.

The EEAPREJ was chosen due to its greater internal consistency, as measured by Cronbach's alpha, when compared to the Self-Handicapping Scale (SHS) by Kaur and Raji (2022). The EEAPREJ was designed to address common situations in the academic environment and has previously been administered to undergraduate and graduate students at various public and private universities in different Brazilian states. Table 1 presents the Summary of the Self-Handicapping Strategies Scale (EEAPREJ) developed by Boruchovitch et al. (2022), with a description of the behaviors of Procrastination, Hyperactivity, and Sabotage along with their respective self-handicapping justifications.

Box 1. Summary of the Self-Harm Strategies Scale (EEAPREJ)

Strategy	Description of Procrastination, Hyperactivity, and Sabotage Behaviors Accompanied by self-harming justifications.
1	I wait until the day before exams to study. If I do poorly, I say I didn't have enough time to study all the material.
2	I don't study with enthusiasm, and when I do poorly, I say it's impossible to get good results because the course workload is too heavy.
3	I play with my phone during class. If I don't get good grades, I say it's because I didn't understand the teacher's explanation.
4	I frequently leave the classroom. If I get a low grade, I say it's because I missed important material.
5	I go out even when I have an important assignment. If I do poorly, I say it's because I had little time to complete it.
6	I deliberately get involved in many activities. If I don't do well, I say I was busy with other things.
7	I go to parties even when I have to turn in an important assignment. I say the assignment was too complex.
8	I talk with my classmates during class. If I don't do well in the course, I say my friends distracted me.
9	I always put off studying and doing academic assignments, sometimes to the point of not completing the tasks at all.
10	I don't read the texts recommended by teachers before class. If I do poorly on the assessment, I say the texts were too boring.
11	I engage in other activities (watching TV, listening to music, and using the internet) even though I know I have little time to complete an assignment.
12	I hang out with friends and/or my boyfriend or girlfriend. If I don't do well on an assignment, I say I didn't have time to focus on my studies.

13	I don't prepare, and then I feel anxious when it's time for the test or seminar. I say that my anxiety held me back.
14	I study the wrong material for the test. If I don't perform well, I say that was the reason for my failure.
15	I put off important tasks until the very last minute. If I do poorly, I say the work was done at the last minute.
16	I don't manage my time well; I have to stay up all night to complete important work. I say I was very sleepy.
17	I get caught up in non-essential details of the important task and end up devoting less attention to its content.
18	I don't spend enough time on important work, and if the result isn't good, I say I didn't put enough effort into it.
19	I do other things during class instead of paying attention. If I do poorly, I say it's because I didn't understand the material.

Source: Scale of 19 Self-Harm Strategies (EEAPREJ) developed by Boruchovitch et al. (2022).

To ensure the sample was adequate for the proposed statistical analysis, the G*Power® software, version 3.1.9.7, was used to calculate the minimum required sample size, considering an effect size $f^2 = 0.15$, significance level $\alpha = 0.05$, statistical power $(1-\beta) = 0.95$, and two predictors, resulting in a requirement of at least 107 participants. The actual number of respondents (528) far exceeded this requirement, lending robustness to the analyses.

The collected data were analyzed using IBM SPSS® version 26 and SmartPLS® version 3 software through Confirmatory Factor Analysis within the framework of Structural Equation Modeling.

For data analysis in Structural Equation Modeling, following the methodology validated by Boruchovitch et al. (2022), the 19 strategies were divided into 3 first-order constructs presented in Box 2.

Box 2. List of Self-Harm Strategies and Constructs

Constructs					
Procrastination		Hyperactivity		Sabotage	
Strategy	Dimension	Strategy	Dimension	Strategy	Dimension
1	PROC 1	4	HIPER 1	3	SABOT 1
2	PROC 2	5	HIPER 2	8	SABOT 2
9	PROC 3	6	HIPER 3	14	SABOT 3
10	PROC 4	7	HIPER 4	17	SABOT 4
13	PROC 5	11	HIPER 5	18	SABOT 5
15	PROC 6	12	HIPER 6	19	SABOT 6
		16	HIPER 7		

Note: Procrastination (PROC); Hyperactivity (HIPER); and Sabotage (SABOT).

Source: Self-Harm Strategies Scale (EEAPREJ), Boruchovitch et al. (2022).

It should be noted that the research was conducted with attention to the autonomy and well-being of the participants, in line with the principles guiding research involving human subjects in Brazil, especially those

established by CNS Resolution No. 510/2016. Before answering the questionnaire, each participant received the Informed Consent Form (ICF), which provided information on what the research was investigating, why the data was being collected, and how it would be used. It was made clear to respondents that participation was entirely voluntary and that participants could withdraw their participation at any time, without needing to provide an explanation and without any consequences. The intention was to ensure that each person decided to participate in a genuinely free and informed manner.

Regarding risks, the study is characterized by minimal risk to participants. The instrument used is a self-report questionnaire, developed and validated by Boruchovitch et al. (2022), and in this type of research—widely applied in different countries and contexts—participants are not exposed to uncomfortable, invasive situations or situations capable of causing any physical or emotional harm. Responses were treated with complete confidentiality: no participant was individually identified, data were analyzed in aggregate form, and their use was restricted to the scientific objectives of the research. Access to the collected information remained under the control of the responsible team, in accordance with the principles of personal protection and minimization of anticipated risks.

Graduates from the past two years were included, as it was understood that their participation would broaden the observation of self-harming strategies throughout the educational trajectory, encompassing both recent experiences from the program and reflections developed after its completion. Lousada & Martins (2005) indicate that this group constitutes a relevant source for evaluating the education received and for understanding the effects of the academic journey, as it brings together accumulated experience and a retrospective view of the process experienced. In this sense, the inclusion of graduates in the study does not conflict with the research focus but broadens the analysis by incorporating subjects who have fully completed the academic experience.

Although graduates may evaluate their experience from a temporal perspective distinct from that of students still enrolled in the program, this condition does not compromise the analytical coherence of the research. This is because all respondents were subjected to the same data collection instrument, the same response options, and the same statistical treatment, such that each participant's academic status was considered a characteristic of the sample, rather than a factor that would distort the phenomenon under study. Thus, the

inclusion of recent graduates adds a complementary perspective on the graduate school trajectory, without altering the consistency of the methodological design or the general comparability of the data produced.

4 Data Analysis

4.1 Sample Characteristics

To describe the sample, demographic variables related to gender, age group, region of residence, and race or ethnicity were recorded. Gender parity was nearly observed, with 51.14% men and 48.86% women. Regarding field of study, half of the participants are enrolled in Business Administration programs, followed by Public Administration (30.49%), Accounting (16.29%), and other business courses (3.03%). The most common age group is between 31 and 40 years old (39.02%), accompanied by a significant presence of respondents between 41 and 50 years old (30.68%); young people up to 30 years old represent 15.53% and those over 50 years old, 14.77%, indicating generational diversity. Most participants reject self-harming behaviors; 91.91% of responses fell into the categories “has nothing to do with me” or “has little to do with me.”

Regarding their academic stage, 52.46% were preparing a dissertation or thesis, 5.49% were taking courses, 2.66% were balancing coursework and writing, and 39.39% had already completed the program. This distribution highlights the participation of students at different stages and of graduates, who are included because they remain in the academic records. Regionally, the Southeast (52.27%) and the South (22.16%) stand out, followed by the Northeast (12.31%), the Midwest (10.61%), and the North (2.65%). Regarding race or ethnicity, 64.96% identify as white, 28.6% as mixed-race, 4.73% as Black, 1.52% as Asian, and 0.19% as Indigenous. Table 1 presents the demographic data of the respondents.

Table 1. Demographic Data of Respondents

Gender	n	%	Field of Study	n	%
Female	258	48,86	Administration	265	50,19
Male	270	51,14	Public Administration	161	30,49
Total	528	100,00	Accounting	86	16,29
			Other	16	3,03
			Total	528	100,00
Age Group	n	%	Graduate Internship	n	%
20 to 30 years old	82	15,53	Credits Earned	29	5,49
Ages 31 to 40	206	39,02	Credits and Writing	14	2,66

Ages 41 to 50	162	30,68	Course Completed	208	39,39
Over 50	78	14,77	Thesis Preparation	277	52,46
Total	528	100,00	Total	528	100,00
Region of Brazil	n	%	Race or Ethnicity	n	%
Midwest	56	10,61	Yellow	8	1,52
Northeast	65	12,31	White	343	64,96
North	14	2,65	Indigenous	1	0,19
Southeast	276	52,27	Mixed	151	28,6
South	117	22,16	Black	25	4,73
Total	528	100,00	Total	528	100,00

Source: survey data.

In terms of socioeconomic profile, 51.33% pursued graduate studies at public universities, 45.83% at private colleges, and 2.84% at mixed community institutions. Regarding financial support, 57.58% never received a scholarship, 30.49% received one throughout their entire program, and 11.93% only for part of their studies. The majority (60.42%) have children or other family responsibilities, revealing the need to balance multiple roles. Most participants (85.80%) remained in their hometown, suggesting a regional connection that favors staying and completing their studies. Table 2 presents the socioeconomic data of the respondents..

Table 2. Socioeconomic Data of Respondents

Educational Institution	n	%	Financial Aid	n	%
Mixed community	15	2,84	No, never	304	57,58
Private	242	45,83	Yes, entire course	161	30,49
Public	271	51,33	Yes, partially	63	11,93
Total	528	100,00	Total	528	100,00
Family Responsibilities	n	%	Moved to a different city	n	%
No	209	39,58	No	453	85,80
Yes	319	60,42	Yes	75	14,20
Total	528	100,00	Total	528	100,00

Source: survey data.

In the Business Administration group, there is a higher proportion of men, predominantly aged between 31 and 50, and a strong presence of students from the Southeast. About 53% attended a public university, and most did not receive scholarships. More than half were writing a dissertation or thesis, while 37% had already completed the program. In self-reported race or ethnicity, 67% identified as white, 25% as mixed-race (), and 5% as Black. Graduate students in Business Administration totaled 426 (80.68%).

Among those enrolled in Public Administration, there is a gender balance and an age distribution similar to that of Business Administration, with a slight increase in the 41–50 age group. Approximately 60% attended public universities and 40% private ones; most did not receive a scholarship. Geographically, they are concentrated in the Southeast (43%) and Midwest (20%). People of mixed-race account for 33% and white people for 59%. More than 60% have family responsibilities, 55% were in the dissertation or thesis writing phase, and 41% were already graduates.

In the Accounting segment, there is a slight female predominance (52%) and greater age diversity, with a significant presence of individuals up to 30 years old. Half of them studied at a public university and 45% at a private college. In this group, 38% received a full scholarship and 19% a partial one. The regional distribution is led by the Southeast (59%), though the other regions are also represented. Regarding academic stage, 54% were working on a dissertation or thesis, and 36% had already completed the program. Self-identification by race or ethnicity is predominantly white (69%), with 22% identifying as mixed-race.

This mapping illustrates the heterogeneity of the sample, allowing us to observe how gender, age group, geographic origin, race/ethnicity, type of educational institution, scholarship status, and stage of the program are distributed across each analyzed area, which enhances the analytical consistency and representativeness of the results.

4.2 Inferential Statistical Analysis

The Self-Harm Strategies Scale developed by Boruchovitch et al. (2022) was validated using the Principal Component Analysis extraction method and the Varimax rotation method with Kaiser normalization. Table 3 presents the results of the confirmatory factor analysis.

Table 3. Confirmatory Factor Analysis - Varimax Rotated Component Matrix

Component	E1	E2	E5	E6	E9	E10	E11
Factor 1	0.701	0.580	0.590	0.623	0.739	0.544	0.720
Component	E12	E13	E15	E16	E17	E18	
Factor 1	0.638	0.618	0.811	0.736	0.701	0.683	
Component	E3	E4	E7	E8	E14	E19	
Factor 2	0.691	0.720	0.311	0.713	0.137	0.683	

Note: Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis. Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization. Rotation converged in 3 iterations. Factor 1 extracted with 13 components and a factor loading of 38.881%. Factor 2 extracted with 4 components and a factor loading of 8.780%.

In the Procrastination construct, component (E15) “I postpone important tasks until the deadline. If I do poorly, I say the work was done at the last minute,” as well as

component (E1) “if I do poorly, I say I didn’t have enough time to study all the material,” with statistical significance of 0.811 and 0.701, respectively, confirm the results of Boruchovitch et al. (2022).

From this perspective, self-defeating strategies reflect patterns that limit students’ engagement with academic challenges; students with greater psychological inflexibility are more prone to academic procrastination (Izadpanah & Charmi, 2022).

According to Xiang et al. (2026), one of the ways students use to reinforce their perception of competence is through self-defeating strategies, via procrastination tactics, which deliberately hinder performance, thereby protecting their perception of competence.

The Hyperactivity Strategies (E11) “I engage in other activities (television, music, and the internet) even though I know I have little time to complete an assignment” and (E6) “I intentionally involve myself in many activities. If I don’t do well, I say I was busy with other things,” were confirmed by the respondents.

Vargas et al. (2018) validated the Self-Defeating Strategies Scale and identified factors reflecting Hyperactivity through problems related to attention control and lack of concentration in long, continuous processes.

The trigger for Hyperactivity may be the degree of uncertainty; the higher the uncertainty, the greater the anxiety regarding the achievement of academic goals. On the other hand, pressure can trigger involvement in various scattered activities and a flight from primary goals via self-defeating strategies (Peris et al., 2023).

Students highlight socio-emotional factors when evaluating academic support services. Reception and psycho-pedagogical support are essential for students with ADHD and adjustment difficulties (Eisenberg & Duarte, 2024). Self-harming strategies are also associated with stress, depression, anxiety, procrastination, self-esteem, and self-compassion (Yildirim & Demir, 2020).

In the Procrastination construct, the component (E9) “I always put off studying and completing academic assignments, sometimes to the point of not doing the activities at all” and (E10) “I do not read the texts recommended by teachers before class. If I do poorly on the assessment, I say the texts were very boring.” The two statements with significance levels of (0.739) and (0.544), respectively, confirm the predictive capacity of the model proposed by Boruchovitch et al. (2022).

The results are also corroborated by the findings of Ganda

and Boruchovitch (2016), who found that procrastination and failure to read the texts assigned by teachers were the main self-defeating strategies adopted by students.

Sabotage is a strategy frequently used by students to manage threats to self-esteem caused by the fear of failing in academic life, which can lead to a search for the protection of self-worth (Vargas et al., 2018).

In the Sabotage construct, the components (E8) "I talk with classmates during class. If I don't do well in the course, I say my friends distracted me" and (E19) "I do other things during class instead of paying attention. If I do poorly, I say it's because I didn't understand the material," the self-defeating strategies were statistically significant, confirming the studies by Cano et al. (2018) which revealed that low self-regulation of learning is the student's difficulty in planning, monitoring, and evaluating their own performance.

The self-defeating strategies identified and adopted by students affect learning and impair performance, persistence in remaining in the program, health, social well-being, and self-confidence (Török et al., 2018).

There is a variety of emotions that permeate life in higher education and graduate school, including the fear of rejection. There is a relationship between hyperactivity—fueled by created expectations and the sense of belonging—and the prospect of academic success (Eisenberg & Duarte, 2024).

Random exits from the classroom, noted in Strategy (E4) "I frequently leave the classroom. If I get a low grade, I say it's because I missed important content," combined with the need for inclusion among peers, expressed in Strategy (E5) "I go out for a walk even when I have important work. If I do poorly, I say I had little time to complete it," represent the need for belonging in the academic environment.

This behavior confirms the studies by Peris et al. (2023), which state that hyperactivity is the constant search for stimuli, associated with the need for validation. The lower the possibility of fulfilling these desires, the greater the anxiety.

In Almeida's (2026) studies, hyperactivity represents one of the neurological conditions that most affect academic performance in higher education and graduate school, associated with demotivation, anxiety, and cognitive overload.

Sabotage examines the frequency with which students have used this self-protection strategy and the implications of this behavior on time management and

the completion of activities related to academic life (Ganda & Boruchovitch, 2016).

Strategy (E18) "I do not invest enough time in important work, and if the result is not good, I say I did not engage," with a significance level of 0.638, highlights respondents' perception of the importance of time management. This is fundamental for eliminating the pressure caused by an excess of activities, thereby reducing stress and anxiety (Eisenberg & Duarte, 2024).

The study by Cano et al. (2018) found that students who are not self-regulated are more likely to sabotage themselves, as they are unable to dedicate themselves to their studies and, at times, end up lacking the persistence to complete their graduate program.

Also related to time management are the hyperactivity strategies recognized by the respondents and linked to the components (E12) "I hang out with friends and/or my boyfriend/girlfriend. If I don't do a good job, I say I didn't have time to invest in my studies" and (E16) "I don't organize my time; I have to stay up all night to complete important assignments. I say I was very sleepy." Sleep acts as an essential pillar for memory consolidation, learning, and mental health, regulating cognitive functions such as focus and attention (Peris et al., 2023).

Hyperactivity impacts academic routines, often resulting in academic sabotage behaviors, which are, in fact, neurological symptoms of inattention, impulsivity, and executive dysfunction (Almeida, 2026).

Time management and setting priorities are essential in combating procrastination. Self-defeating behaviors, such as overcommitting and perfectionism, play a significant role in making the completion of a graduate program a feasible process (Yildirim & Demir, 2020).

Even though procrastination focuses on self-defeating strategies, the literature defines it as something more comprehensive, which includes creating barriers such as making choices that undermine academic performance (Yildirim & Demir, 2020).

The relationship between procrastination and lack of motivation is one of emotional cause and effect; procrastination acts as a defense mechanism against emotional discomfort, rather than a simple lack of motivation. In the present study, this trend was confirmed in the Procrastination construct in the components (E2) "I stop studying willingly, and when I do poorly, I say it's not possible to get good results; the course workload is too heavy" and (E13) "I don't prepare, and then I feel anxious when taking the exam/seminar. I say that anxiety

hindered me.”

The use of long-term procrastination strategies can entail costs in academic life, constituting a vicious cycle (Yildirim & Demir, 2020). However, self-defeating strategies can bring short-term benefits such as reduced effort and procrastination, which can momentarily alleviate anxiety (Cano et al., 2018).

Perfectionist students may lose focus on the main task and resort to self-sabotage, developing a fear of not performing perfectly, of not being satisfied with their achievements, and of feeling guilt, shame, and low self-esteem (Akar et al., 2018).

The components (E3) “I keep playing with my phone during class. If I don’t get good results, I say it’s because I didn’t understand the teacher’s explanation” and (E17) “I get fixated on non-essential details of the important activity and end up devoting less attention to its content,” linked to the Sabotage construct, with statistical significance of (0.691) and (0.701) respectively, confirm studies that point to sabotage as an obstacle to the path to success, imposing restrictions on the student’s academic life and psychological well-being (Akar et al., 2018; Cano et al., 2018; Yildirim & Demir, 2020).

Component (E7), which refers to the Hyperactivity strategy with a factor loading of (0.311) and points to the statement: “I go to parties even when I have to turn in important work and say that the assignment was too complex,” and component (E14), the Sabotage strategy with a factor loading of (0.137) and the statement: “I study the wrong material for the test, and if I don’t perform well, I say that was the reason,” were retained in the Confirmatory Factor Analysis.

The fact that two components have a p-value below (0.40) lower than what is recommended in the literature (Hair et al., 2021) does not invalidate the instrument; rather, indicates that, in the context of this study, these two statements do not explain the extracted variance. In comparison, the literature reports exclusions of approximately 30% of the components, which did not affect the modeling results (Schroeder & Sims, 2018).

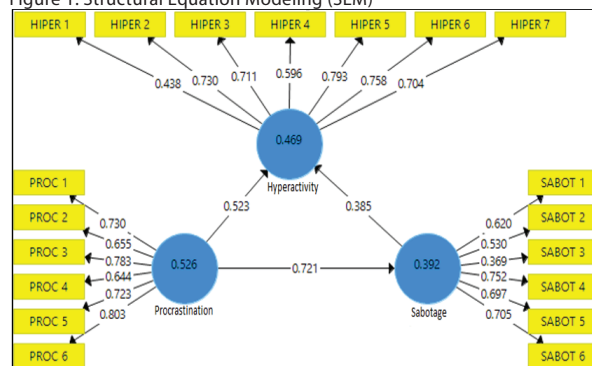
Self-harming strategies limit learning, course retention, performance, integration into social life, and professional success (Wyse et al., 2023).

The data revealed that the respondents’ assessment is favorable to their academic trajectory, as the majority of responses reject self-harming behaviors; 91.91% of the choices fell into the categories “has nothing to do with me” or “has little to do with me.” Therefore, in general,

students consider themselves integrated into academic life (Boruchovitch et al., 2022).

The balance of the variable distribution was confirmed by Confirmatory Factor Analysis. Figure 1 presents the Structural Equation Modeling.

Figure 1. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM)



Note: Relationship between Self-Harm Strategies and Construct Dimensions detailed in Table 2. AVE Procrastination (0.526); Hyperactivity (0.469) and Sabotage (0.392). Factor loadings above 0.40.

Regarding the relationship between the constructs Procrastination and Sabotage, the p-value (0.721) indicates a strong positive correlation. These results are confirmed by the studies of Cano et al. (2018) and Ganda & Boruchovitch (2016), which report that insecure students doubt their own ability to perform academic activities, fear failure, and, in an effort to protect themselves, tend to exhibit self-sabotaging behaviors, such as avoiding tasks through procrastination.

The student’s willingness to avoid procrastination, manage time, and set regular schedules for writing and submitting work to the advisor defines behaviors that steer the student away from self-sabotage, associated with low stress levels and the ability to complete graduate studies (Kearns et al., 2008).

The student’s self-defeating strategies consciously sabotage their performance to protect their perceived competence in the event of failure. The student may procrastinate before an exam and cite fatigue as an excuse for poor performance, rather than admitting a lack of ability (Xiang et al., 2026).

The constructs of procrastination and hyperactivity with a p-value (0.523) are positively correlated. Hyperactivity driven by the pursuit of perfection, combined with the fear of failure, which leads to procrastination, results in unfinished and delayed work. Extreme sensitivity to criticism can cause the student to avoid attempting tasks out of fear of frustration. According to Yildirim and Demir

(2020), academic procrastination is considered a form of self-defeating strategy.

Hyperactivity is associated with the pursuit of success; factors that intensify these effects are related to the degree of uncertainty that triggers anxiety regarding the achievement of goals, and this pressure can lead to procrastination and trigger the process of escape via self-defeating strategies (Peris et al., 2023).

The relationship between hyperactivity and procrastination follows a complex dynamic. Procrastination functions as a defense mechanism against challenging tasks, and hyperactivity arises from the overload of expectations generated (Eisenberg & Duarte, 2024).

According to Almeida (2026), academic avoidance in graduate school stems from the interaction between vulnerabilities arising from procrastination and hyperactivity in institutional environments unprepared to accommodate functional diversity.

The relationship between the constructs of hyperactivity and sabotage, with a p-value of 0.392, was not statistically significant, possibly because they arise from opposing behavioral patterns characterized by distinct dynamics, acting as competing forces in terms of energy and intention, although both result in functional impairments.

Vargas et al. (2018) validated the Boruchovitch & Ganda (2016) Self-Injurious Strategies Scale and identified factors reflecting time management problems (procrastination), inadequate preparation for academic activities (sabotage), as well as problems related to attention and concentration control (hyperactivity). Strategies that create obstacles may protect against failure.

Self-defeating strategies are less likely when the goal to be achieved is within the student's competence. Determining the task's level of difficulty requires teachers to assess students' competence and assign activities according to each student's potential (Chen et al., 2024).

The evaluative threat posed by the teacher leads to self-defeating strategies rather than fostering the student's potential, as the emphasis shifts from the goal of learning to a focus on avoiding failure or achieving success in tasks (Xiang & Gershman, 2025).

Structural Equation Modeling requires tests that certify the quality of the results, and this stage involves assessing factor loadings, reliability, and validity (Hair et al., 2021). Table 4 presents the Measurement Model.

Table 4. Measurement Model - Indicators of Discriminant and Convergent Validity

Fornell-Larcker Criterion	Hyperactivity	Procrastination	Sabotage
Hyperactivity	0.785		
Procrastination	0.701	0.725	
Self-sabotage	0.662	0.721	0.726
HTMT Criteria	0.863	0.894	0.886
AVE	0.469	0.469	0.526
Cronbach's Alpha	0.805	0.805	0.818
Adjusted R ²	0.712	0.712	0.666
Convergent Validity	0.857	0.869	0.787

Note: Discriminant Validity, construct differentiation; data for the Fornell-Larcker criterion (diagonal row of the matrix) are in bold. The square root of the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) for the construct must be greater than the highest correlation of the latent variable with any other position in the model/matrix. For the Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT) criterion, values below 0.90 are expected. AVE values above 0.40 and Convergent Validity with the Composite Reliability (CR) criterion values above 0.70.

The KMO test and Bartlett's test yielded statistically significant results. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy seeks values above 80%. With a p-value of 0.939, the study sample was found to be adequate. Bartlett's sphericity test showed a chi-square value of 3929.969 with 171 degrees of freedom and significance at a p-value of 0.000. There were no missing values, and the cross-sectional series length was 528 for valid values.

4.3 Discussion of Results

The survey findings revealed striking nuances regarding the frequency and nature of self-harming strategies observed among graduate students in the business field, critically aligning with the theoretical framework. The majority of participants reject such behaviors, as 91.91% of responses fell into the categories "has nothing to do with me" or "has little to do with me." This apparent low reported incidence has been interpreted in the literature as a result of self-protective mechanisms of academic self-image, linked to the denial or rationalization of dysfunctional behaviors (Sternberg, 2013; Melhem, 2022). Clarke and MacCann (2016) and Boruchovitch et al. (2022) note that admitting self-harming behavior is often painful; in high-exposure contexts, students tend to avoid negative perceptions of themselves, shielding themselves from judgment.

A smaller portion of the group engages in practices linked to procrastination ("I postpone completing important tasks until the deadline," 18.75%) and intellectual self-defeating strategies ("I focus on non-essential details of the important activity," 15.75%). This pattern resembles the findings of Schwinger et al. (2014), who point to

procrastination as a recurring manifestation of self-defeating strategies in higher education. Even among graduate students, recognized as mature academics, patterns of delay and distraction persist that align with Berglas and Jones's (1988) description of self-handicapping as a reaction to the fear of failing or of not meeting academic and family expectations.

The resulting factor structure, which required the removal of two items with low loadings and retained the remaining items within factors described in the literature (procrastination, hyperactivity, and self-sabotage), confirms the instrument's consistency and sensitivity. This finding is consistent with Boruchovitch et al. (2022), who advocate for scales adapted to the Brazilian context and specific populations, such as graduate students. Although the EEAPREJ was initially validated among undergraduate students, its application in this study broadens its scope and demonstrates its suitability for investigating self-defeating patterns at different stages of academic training.

The nearly unanimous rejection of items related to classroom distraction (E8) and studying incorrect content (E14) suggests a social desirability effect, a concept discussed by Melhem (2022). Graduate students, immersed in environments that demand high performance and intellectual autonomy, avoid associating themselves with behaviors viewed as a lack of commitment, thereby reinforcing a positive academic identity. This trend echoes Santos et al. (2015), who argue that graduate school intensifies the pursuit of approval and recognition, leading students to downplay flaws considered elementary.

The predominance of negative responses is also related to the sociodemographic profile of the sample: students, mostly from public universities, without scholarships, and with significant family responsibilities. Gupta and Geetika (2020) show that those who juggle multiple roles resort to self-preservation strategies, including denying difficulties and rationalizing delays. These mechanisms seek to balance academic demands and personal pressures, a context discussed by Nganga et al. (2023), particularly for women and marginalized groups.

Another relevant finding was the high correlation between procrastination and self-sabotage, identified through structural equation modeling. These behaviors appear to operate in tandem, serving both as a defense against failure and as an attempt to adapt to challenges perceived as insurmountable. Wyse, Machado, and Frare (2023) had previously described that, graduate students in business, subjected to high levels of stress, employ self-defeating tactics to cope with fear of failure and the burden of academic and professional expectations.

Hyperactivity emerged as a distinct factor, showing a moderate correlation with procrastination and a low correlation with sabotage, which broadens the debate on the diversity of self-defeating behaviors. For Zhu, Au, and Yates (2016), excessive activity functions simultaneously as an escape from sources of stress and as a means of constructing an image of commitment to the academic community.

Validity and confirmatory reliability tests indicated good fit of the constructs, although the AVE for sabotage was slightly below the recommended level. The decision to retain this factor was supported by the theoretical weight of the concept in understanding the set of self-defeating strategies, in accordance with the guidelines of Hair et al. (2014) and Bido and Silva (2019). This decision also acknowledges the specificities of the Brazilian context and the complexity of these behaviors in graduate studies. The results also align with the literature regarding the long-term effects of these strategies. Sappington and Weisman (2004), Goering (2014), and Kräkel and Müller (2012) show that self-defeating patterns extend beyond the academic environment and impact professional performance, including in teamwork. The findings point to the urgent need for initiatives focused on developing emotional self-regulation, stress management, and more supportive learning environments, as advocated by Decker and Mitchell (2016) and Ruben-Clapper (2021).

In general, although business graduate students are reluctant to admit to self-harming practices, patterns of procrastination, self-sabotage, and hyperactivity remain identifiable, consistent with trends highlighted in the national and international literature. The findings reinforce the need for pedagogical approaches that go beyond merely identifying these behaviors, incorporating prevention, psychosocial support, and strategies adopted by graduate programs to reduce negative impacts during training and in the transition to the job market. acadêmicas e profissionais.

5 Conclusions

The main findings reveal that, although most students deny engaging in self-harming behaviors, a significant portion recognizes themselves in practices of procrastination and self-sabotage, especially in the more advanced stages of their academic journey, such as writing dissertations and theses. Confirmatory factor analysis largely validated the theoretical structure underlying the EEAPREJ by Boruchovitch et al. (2022), reinforcing the centrality of these dimensions in the daily academic lives of business graduate students.

The results are consistent with international and national evidence, such as that discussed by Yildirim & Demir (2020), Lee et al. (2022), Ngang et al. (2023), Wyse et al. (2023), Peris et al. (2023), Gross et al. (2024), Eisenberg & Duarte (2024), and Xiang et al. (2026), broadening the debate on the emotional, cognitive, and social challenges faced by students in *stricto sensu* business programs.

As a practical contribution, the research highlights the need for student inclusion policies, combined with ongoing teacher training and psycho-pedagogical support, which transform the learning environment into an equity space where diversity is valued and the right to learn is guaranteed for all. This strategic approach seeks to break down pedagogical, attitudinal, and structural barriers that hinder civic participation.

As an academic contribution, the study proposes an analysis of the cognitive processes underlying human behavior, represented by the mental mechanisms that shape attention, reasoning, and decision-making in the teaching-learning relationship, given that self-defeating attitudes remain poorly understood in research that focuses on describing situations in which students adopt self-defeating behaviors and how these are perceived.

The study's main pedagogical contribution lies in broadening our understanding of self-defeating patterns and their implications for the academic and professional development of students in *stricto sensu* graduate programs. By highlighting that self-defeating strategies persist, even among academically experienced individuals, the study points to the need for institutional interventions aimed at promoting self-regulation skills, mental health, and stress management, in order to mitigate the impacts of these behaviors on performance, retention, and high-quality academic output. It is worth noting that self-harming behaviors are most frequently observed during the phase when graduate students are in the process of writing their theses and dissertations. In other words, all personal, organizational, and financial investments have already been made.

In Brazil, as measures applied to educational institutions and students, Law 14.819/2024 established the National Policy on Psychosocial Care in School Communities, creating an environment that promotes emotional and mental well-being for students, teachers, and staff through integrated actions in the areas of health, education, and social assistance, addressing mental distress, preventing violence, strengthening resilience, and promoting a culture of peace and acceptance in the school environment.

The implementation of the National Policy on Psychosocial Care in School Communities is coordinated

with Law 13.935/2019, which provides for the provision of psychology and social assistance services in public school systems starting with basic education, in coordination with the Health in Schools Program and the Psychosocial Care Network, with governance managed by Intersectoral Working Groups involving the school community.

In the context of curricular flexibility and adaptation, the Ministry of Education defines Article 59 of Law 9394/1996 Guidelines and Foundations of National Education as the legal framework, establishing that schools must offer specific curricula and educational resources to students with special needs, and that the involvement of the school community must follow the Political-Pedagogical Project.

The connection between existing laws and recommendations to universities and public authorities requires a transition from an exclusively normative model based on rigid standards and pre-established social norms to a model of public policies grounded in valuing students' flexibility and individuality, where universities generate data on specialized support for students and public authorities transform reality by updating legislation to reflect the social context. This cycle can be enhanced through continuous monitoring of demands, evaluation of the impact of actions, and institutional dialogue via constructive interaction. The laws already exist; what is missing is transforming them into concrete initiatives and investments.

Finally, it is important to emphasize that higher education institutions and *stricto sensu* graduate programs must implement structured initiatives for psychosocial support and training in social-emotional skills. Only an integrated approach, capable of promoting not only intellectual development but also emotional health and resilience, will enable the creation of academic environments that are more equitable, inclusive, and conducive to the training of critical, ethical professionals prepared for the challenges of contemporary society.

Nevertheless, some limitations must be acknowledged. The use of a non-probability sample limits the generalizability of the results to the entire population of *stricto sensu* graduate students in business in Brazil. Furthermore, self-reported behaviors may be subject to social desirability bias, reducing the genuine identification of self-harming strategies. The exclusion of two items from the factor model, although methodologically justified, indicates a need for future adjustments to the instrument, depending on the audience and the context of application. As an agenda for future research, we recommend replicating the study in other fields of knowledge, such as information technology, and in different regions of the country, especially the North and Northeast, which have historically been underrepresented in educational

research. We also suggest paying closer attention to vulnerable populations, such as women, Black individuals, and Indigenous peoples, and specific characteristics of students who juggle academic, professional, and family responsibilities, in order to understand the diversity of academic experiences and the different mechanisms of self-harming behaviors triggered in these complex and dynamic contexts.

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