

Parenting Styles, Gender Roles, and Academic Burnout among Chinese Students: A Cultural Perspective

Yundi Wang, Aini Marina Ma'rof, Rose Manisah Sulong

Universiti Putra Malaysia

Email: gs62940@student.upm.edu.my, rosemanisah@upm.edu.my

Corresponding Author Email ainimarina@upm.edu.my

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Abstract

Academic burnout among Chinese students is particularly severe due to a unique mix of cultural, educational, and family pressures. The strong emphasis placed on academic achievement and high family expectations intensifies this issue. While research on academic burnout is expanding, most studies have focused on Western contexts and often overlook cultural factors specific to China, such as the influence of parenting styles, societal expectations, and gender roles. This study introduces a conceptual framework that explores how Chinese cultural values impact students' burnout, with a particular focus on parenting styles and gender norms. It highlights how traditional values related to family honor and academic success shape parenting approaches, which, in turn, affect students' mental well-being. The research also investigates how societal expectations tied to gender roles contribute to differing levels of academic stress and burnout between boys and girls. By evaluating the effects of authoritative, authoritarian, and permissive parenting styles while considering gender as a moderating factor, this framework offers important insights into the dynamics of burnout within Chinese culture.

Keywords: Academic Burnout, Parenting Styles, Gender Roles, Social Expectation, Chinese Cultural Context

Introduction

Internationally, academic burnout related to coursework is beginning to be a focal point of educational research on mental health. As a mental health disorder, students' academic burnout usually manifests itself as emotional exhaustion, disengagement from learning, and a decreased sense of achievement, reflecting their stress response to chronic academic pressure (Fiorilli, Stasio, Chiacchio, Pepe, & Salmela-Aro, 2017). Research has shown that academic burnout is particularly pronounced among Chinese students, closely related to China's unique cultural context, competitive education system, and high family expectations for academics (Zhang, Klassen, & Wang, 2013). However, although existing studies have explored the causes of academic burnout, most of them have centered on the Western context and have not been effective in explaining factors unique to the Chinese culture, such

as parenting styles, social expectations, and gender role interactions, leaving a gap in systematic frameworks (Wang et al., 2020).

Current research on how parenting styles influence academic burnout largely ignores the unique pressures created by Chinese culture's emphasis on face-saving and gender role expectations (Wang, Liew, & Li, 2022). In Chinese society, academic achievement is not only about personal performance but is also seen as a symbol of family honor and social status. When families place high expectations on their children's academics, they do so not only for the sake of their children's future development but also to maintain and enhance the family's image. As a result, parents often adopt strict time management and highly controlled educational methods to ensure that their children meet the expectations of society and the family.

At the same time, China's examination-oriented education system is highly competitive, and limited educational resources make the national college entrance examination (Gaokao) the only way to enter prestigious universities, further exacerbating the dilemma faced by parents and students. With this sole pathway to success, parents tend to tighten academic control to ensure high test scores (Cai, Lu, Pan, & Zhong, 2019). This model limits students' fulfillment to academic achievement alone, leading to burnout and feelings of helplessness when they fail to meet expectations. In this environment, even high-achieving students are unable to escape the chronic psychological stress that makes academic burnout a common problem.

In addition, the inherent contradictions in gender role expectations in Chinese culture exacerbate the differences in academic pressures on male and female students (Subramani & Venkatachalam, 2019). Traditional attitudes ascribe "masculine" qualities to males, requiring them to excel academically while at the same time assuming family and social responsibilities. As a result, parents tend to adopt a stricter parenting style for boys, aiming for high academic achievement. However, this highly controlling approach is often associated with emotional exhaustion and maladaptive behavior in boys. In contrast, females are endowed with "feminine" traits and are expected by their parents to demonstrate obedience and patience despite lower academic expectations. In sum, the face culture, the test-based education system, and gender role expectations together shape the academic environment of Chinese students and have a profound impact on academic burnout. However, current research lacks a systematic conceptual framework to integrate these complex factors. This is important, as it may fill the gaps among cultural, family, and school variables that might be causing academic burnout. Most of the previous research has focused on only one aspect, such as parental influence or school pressure, without considering any dynamic interaction among such variables. The current study will look for practical implications of this complex interaction for tailored interventions and prevention.

Research Objectives

To evaluate the relationship between authoritative parenting style and academic burnout among Chinese students.

To evaluate the relationship between authoritarian parenting style and academic burnout among Chinese students.

To evaluate the relationship between permissive parenting style and academic burnout among Chinese students.

To determine whether gender differences significantly affect the level and nature of academic burnout.

To explore how traditional Chinese cultural values interact with parenting styles to shape students' academic burnout.

Literature Review

Academic Burnout

In 2022, in a survey of 24,758 students, the China Youth Research Center found that 31.3% of students had symptoms of anxiety, and 17.9% showed symptoms of depression, indicating a serious mental health problem among students (China Youth Research Center, 2022). Research further reveals that academic burnout has become a key factor affecting adolescents' mental health, with significant negative impacts on their academic performance and long-term mental health (Zhang, Gan, & Cham, 2007). This problem is further exacerbated by the pressures of social and family expectations in the context of China's culture of focusing on academic achievement (Luo, Zhang, & Chen, 2020).

Academic burnout typically refers to the emotional exhaustion, detachment from learning, and diminished sense of achievement that occurs when students are under constant academic pressure, and this phenomenon has a profound impact on students' physical and mental health, academic performance, and quality of life (Schaufeli, Martinez, Pinto, Salanova, & Bakker, 2002). Therefore, effective measures should be adopted to prevent and intervene in academic burnout. Researchers in many countries have developed appropriate treatment methods dealing with the issue of academic burnouts, accruing much valuable experience in intervention techniques. However, all these strategies need adjustments and modifications in the Chinese cultural context to be appropriately effective. In practice, for instance, it was found that relaxation training and time management techniques reduce academic burnout in Mexico (Jezini Martínez et al., 2022); however, relying only on such strategies might not yield desired results within the Chinese context. Studies found that academic burnout in Chinese students is usually caused by the great expectations of family and society, especially pressuring by parents for higher achievements and social pressure toward performance (Luo et al., 2020). Thus, the intervention programs should focus on social and family aspects, goal setting in a realistic manner, and develop communication and collaboration between families and schools.

Family Education

Family education has been a primordial concern of both educational and psychological research inspired by Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, which views the family as one of the major microsystems in influencing children's academic, social, and emotional development. Although the theory underlines the relevance of family dynamics, at the same time, it opens the door to further discussion of how different parenting styles and family pressures—particularly in highly academic environments like China—affect adolescents' engagement in school and contribute to burnout.

Research on academic burnout frequently focuses on student-teacher relationships and the effects of teaching styles on students' motivation and well-being. Numerous studies emphasize the significance of teaching approaches and school settings in contributing to academic stress and burnout. However, family education is another critical factor that,

though less studied, has a substantial impact on students' academic experiences. The family environment, characterized by parenting styles, emotional support, and academic expectations, interacts with school influences to form a broader context in which students experience academic pressure.

Family education encompasses academic support, emotional care, behavioral modeling, and talent nurturing (Epstein, 2001). While a supportive family environment generally benefits learning, in high-stakes educational systems such as China's, the emotional climate within the family can sometimes increase academic stress, leading to burnout rather than motivation (Fan & Chen, 2001). High parental expectations, which are common in East Asian families, often align with authoritarian practices, potentially creating psychological stress rather than fostering positive academic engagement (Hill & Taylor, 2004).

The Role of Parenting Styles in Academic Burnout under Social Expectations in China

There are differences in the study of academic burnout due to cultural differences between China and the West. Western scholars believe that authoritative parenting styles are effective in reducing academic burnout by striking a balance between support and autonomy and helping students enhance intrinsic motivation and resilience in coping with stress. In contrast, authoritarian and permissive parenting styles are usually associated with higher academic burnout in Western studies, which may be related to the fact that they inhibit students' autonomy and make them more likely to experience emotional exhaustion and feelings of helplessness (Lamborn, Mounts, Steinberg, & Dornbusch, 1991).

Interestingly, however, in the context of Chinese collectivist culture, research has shown that authoritarian parenting styles do not necessarily increase academic burnout (Zhu, Cheong, Wang, & Tong, 2023). which may be because, in the Chinese cultural context, individuals tend to have a particularly strong sense of family values, and individual achievement is often equated with family honor, e.g., the Chinese family has a family by bloodline. This sense of family responsibility and the importance of family expectations may lead students to feel a sense of "Collective honor" in the face of their parents' strict demands (Yao, Ramirez-Marin, Brett, Aslani, & Semnani-Azad, 2017). As a result, despite authoritarian parenting styles, students tend to work harder to meet family expectations and may even reduce academic burnout to some extent because they see academics as a way to repay their parents.

Education is generally valued in Chinese culture, and many parents view their children's academic success as an important factor in the family's future (Junju Wang & Lin, 2019). As a result, parents who are academically rigorous with their children are often understood to be doing so out of caring for their children rather than simply controlling or suppressing them. In this context, students may be more likely to understand their parents' high level of intervention, thereby increasing their intrinsic motivation to view academics as part of fulfilling family expectations. To some extent, authoritarian parenting styles in this culture can even be transformed into a source of academic motivation and help students overcome burnout.

Gender Differences in Academic Stress

Gender differences in academic burnout have received widespread attention in national and international research. Western studies have generally shown that female students usually

have higher levels of academic burnout than males, possibly because women are more likely to perceive stress and are also more inclined to empathy and self-care (Misra & Castillo, 2004). However, research findings in China are not entirely consistent. Some studies have found higher levels of academic burnout among male students than among females, which may be related to men's relatively lesser commitment to academics as well as lower motivation to learn (Liu et al., 2023). For example, through a meta-analysis of the factors influencing academic burnout among Chinese college students, Huizi and Xianwei (2018), noted that the burnout level of male students was significantly higher than that of females.

In addition, the study found that this gender difference may be related to social expectations. Chinese society has higher expectations for males to take on more social and economic responsibilities, which may lead to males showing higher burnout when facing academic stress (Tomkiewicz, Frankel, Sagan, & Wang, 2011). It, therefore, might have a different mechanism in influencing gender differences within a Chinese cultural context than that of Western cultures.

Under the expected changes of gender roles in modern Chinese society, the manifestation of gender differences in academic burnout has also been upgraded to be more complex (Fiorilli et al., 2017). A further investigation may concentrate on the mediating effect of gender differences between parenting styles and academic burnout to capture long-term influences from traditional attitudes and emphasize the need to consider personal coping strategies.

Self-Determination Theory

Self-Determination Theory, developed by Ryan and Deci in 2000, focuses on the three innate psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. The theory postulates that to the extent that these human needs are being satisfied, individuals will exhibit a greater sense of motivation and psychological well-being. Conversely, low motivation and emerging stress or even burnout come as a result from when these needs are not met (Ryan & Deci, 2024). However, when these needs are not satisfied, it may result in a decrement of motivation, increment of the level of stress, and finally to burnout. SDT differentiates between two kinds of motivation: intrinsic motivation, that is, an activity for the enjoyment or interest it provides, and extrinsic motivation, that is, the execution of an activity because of pressures or rewards coming from the environment. In fact, studies have shown that overall, intrinsic motivation is associated with better mental health and performance, while extrinsic motivation is a contributing factor to greater stress, anxiety, and burnout. (Ryan & Deci, 2024).

Parenting styles significantly influence the psychological fulfillment and motivation of students to learn. Authoritative parents provide the needed support and autonomy, thus satisfying the children's needs for independence and connection (Baumrind, 1971). Characteristically, students experiencing authoritative rearing are generally more motivated, resistant to academic stress, and less prone to burnout than others. (Grolnick & Ryan, 1989). Meanwhile, the authoritarian style is controlling and rigid; this restricts students' self-governing autonomy and relies more on external motivation, therefore weakening intrinsic motivation. (Steinberg, Lamborn, Dornbusch, & Darling, 1992). In this respect, this style of parenting does not develop a love for learning but rather may cause emotional detachment, accumulation of stress, and an increased risk of burnout. On the other hand, permissive

parenting, which is essentially void of structure and support, similarly provides little direction in learning for students, fails to meet competency needs, and lowers motivation, ultimately heightening the chances of burnout. (Lamborn et al., 1991).

It is to this aspect that, based on Self-Determination Theory, academic burnout can be represented through symptoms of emotional exhaustion, disengagement from academics, falling grades, and other signs of a stressful reaction to ongoing academic pressures. The SDT postulates that when students' autonomy, competence, and relatedness needs are not satisfied, the students become more susceptible to burnout. More specifically, emotional exhaustion is likely to emanate from excessive externally induced stress and from a low level of intrinsic motivation, whereas reduced academic accomplishment occurs when it no longer becomes possible for students to experience pleasure or satisfaction in their studies. Decreased achievement is associated with feelings of incompetence and decreased self-efficacy (Schaufeli, Salanova, González-Romá, & Bakker, 2002). Research also suggests that students whose motivation is driven by external pressures or rewards are more likely to feel fatigued and de-motivated, leading to higher levels of academic burnout (Leung, Wong, Wong, & McBride-Chang, 2010). Thus, SDT's basic needs theory provides an important framework for understanding academic burnout, suggesting that meeting students' psychological needs (e.g., by providing appropriate autonomy, support, and feedback) can be effective in mitigating burnout, while frustrated needs may exacerbate burnout. This highlights the important role that educators and parents play in enhancing students' academic success and psychological well-being, helping them find intrinsic motivation to learn, and reducing the negative impact of academic burnout on mental health (Ajayi et al., 2022).

Conclusion and Implications

Summary of Key Points

This study outlines a conceptual framework for understanding how academic burnout among Chinese students is influenced by social expectations, parenting styles, and gender differences. Academic burnout is a serious mental health problem exacerbated by the culture's over-emphasis on academic success. In China, parenting styles influenced by collectivist values may uniquely affect students, and authoritarian parenting styles do not necessarily increase burnout as they do in other cultures. On the other hand, some students perceive stringent expectations as an expression of family care and responsibility, which motivates them to meet the expectations of both family and society. The existence of gender differences further complicates this matter. While studies in Western settings often report higher burnout scores for female students, some research in China has at times found that male students are suffering with higher levels of burnout. This perhaps is due to the traditional expectations by society concerning men to make it.

Implications for Parents and Educators

This complex influence of cultural expectations, parenting styles, and gender roles on student academic burnout needs to be weighed by both parents and educators alike. Parents should adopt a balanced interest in their child's academic success with the consideration of their child's mental health. Parents can be aware even of cultural considerations and, rather than regarding academic successes or failures as reflecting family honor, should give more emphasis to guidance and care. On the other hand, educators can establish nurturing school

settings, provide resources such as counseling and stress management programs, and maintain open channels of communication with families. Families and schools can work together in order to develop an integrated support system that will be one of the factors helping to solve academic burnout.

Future Research Directions

This theoretical framework suggests several avenues for further research. There is, in particular, a need for empirical studies that address how social expectations, parenting styles, and gender differences may interact in influencing academic burnout across the Chinese cultural context. Longitudinal studies would be of much value in this regard since it would enable researchers to trace changes over time, especially related to changing gender roles and social expectations. Cross-cultural research also needs to be conducted, as comparing the causes of academic burnout in different educational systems and cultures will help deepen our understanding of these factors and develop culturally relevant intervention strategies. Moreover, future studies will need to consider such moderating factors as peer support and personal resilience in relation to the role of the school environment in mitigating academic burnout. All these factors might show not only the level of burnout but also allow for the identification of those students who are more susceptible to stress, making it possible to work out an individual approach to cope with stress.

By integrating the influences of social, family, and individual factors, future research could create a more comprehensive theoretical model, providing stronger support for the prevention and intervention of academic burnout.

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