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Journal of International Students
Volume 15, Issue 6 (2025), pp. 1-20
ISSN: 2162-3104 (Print), 2166-3750 (Online)
jistudents.org
https://doi.org/10.32674/szasz867

To Be or Not: Exploring the Sense of Meaninglessness among Chinese Undergraduates

Heyuan Wang
Ningbo University, China

Qingquan Qiu
Jiayao Zhu
Qingqing Ge
Ningbo University, China

Clayton Smith
University of Windsor, Canada

Wenqian Ding
Ningbo University, China

Donghai Gan
Ningbo Education Bureau, China

ABSTRACT

In this paper, we investigate the pervasive sense of meaninglessness among Chinese undergraduates, examining the multifaceted influences of educational models, social media pressures, peer competition, and family dynamics. Through qualitative interviews, the research reveals how these factors shape students' well-being and academic experiences, highlighting the need for comprehensive support systems to address existential crises. The findings reveal the complex interplay between external pressures and internal values, emphasizing the importance of integrating practical experiences, enhancing digital literacy, and promoting student-centered learning to foster a more meaningful university experience. This study contributes novel insights to the discourse on student mental health and academic success in higher education.

Keywords: Educational Models, Social Media, Peer Pressure, Native Family, Sense of Meaninglessness

Although the undergraduate experience is crucial for shaping students' life trajectories and fostering their adaptability to society (Briggs et al., 2012), many undergraduates struggle with unclear learning objectives and plans and often experience feelings of isolation, particularly during their first year. The transition from the structured environment of secondary education to the more liberal, independent, and individualized university model can pose significant challenges (Christie et al., 2013). Students must adapt quickly to these distinct educational paradigms and navigate the new academic landscape (Cameron & Rideout, 2022). Research indicates that freshmen require substantial support to manage both academic demands and the emotional upheaval of moving from the familiar home environment to the unfamiliar university setting (Wilcox et al., 2005). Unfortunately, these challenges do not diminish as students progress; instead, academic, emotional, and career-related pressures intensify in the senior years, often triggering anxiety, worry, and depression (Bewick et al., 2010; Li et al., 2022). A recent meta-analysis confirmed the global prevalence of depression and anxiety among college students (Li et al., 2022).

Moreover, the commodification of higher education, driven by global expansion and neoliberal ideologies, has turned degrees and diplomas into screening tools for employers (Jonbekova, 2020). As a result, universities are increasingly perceived as career-preparation institutions, with students focusing on the utilitarian value of education rather than the intrinsic value of knowledge (Jonbekova, 2020). This shift has led many undergraduates to question the purpose and value of their university experience (O'Shea, 2016; Noyens et al., 2019). A survey among Chinese undergraduates, including those at prestigious institutions such as Peking University, revealed a pervasive lack of clear career planning and a "dual absence of interest and aspiration" (Xu, 2022). This skepticism underscores the urgent need to address the existential concerns of undergraduates to enhance their well-being and academic success.

This study aims to explore the underlying causes of sense of meaninglessness among Chinese undergraduates through qualitative interviews and to examine its impact on academic achievement and psychological well-being. By adopting a multidimensional approach, this research fills a gap in the literature regarding the comprehensive analysis of the sense of meaninglessness among university students. It offers novel insights into how educational models, social media influences, peer competition, and family dynamics collectively shape students' experiences and perceptions of their university lives. These findings have implications not only for China but also for other countries facing similar challenges in higher education.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Viktor Frankl pioneered the concept of "existential meaning" by merging existentialist philosophy with his Holocaust experiences, although he left the term undefined (Frankl, 1992). Reker, a Canadian psychologist, later offered a multidimensional definition, viewing existential meaning as an individual's recognition of principles, coherence, and purpose, along with the pursuit and achievement of valued goals, leading to a sense of fulfillment (Reker &

Chamberlain, 2000). Existentialism posits "existence" as a subjective human consciousness intertwined with personal feelings, emotions, and affective experiences, reflecting the inner world (Xu, 1986). An "existential crisis" is a philosophical dilemma in which individuals confront the emptiness of life. Sartre's philosophy (Smith, J., 2005) views humans as the architects of their existence, capable of defining and creating their own lives. H. Erikson (1959) posits that self-concept evolves throughout life, with adolescence being a pivotal period marked by the struggle to establish self-identity amidst role confusion. This exploration often extends into early adulthood, where individuals grapple with new social demands and complexities, leading to existential crises and a sense of disconnection, as described by R.D. Laing (1994). University life, which coincides with the "emerging adulthood" phase, presents a stage where students juggle academic burdens, career uncertainties, and novel learning methods. They face the paradox of striving for success within the system while seeking freedom and the true meaning of life (Liao & Xiao, 2022).

Despite growing research on college students' search for meaning and purpose, significant gaps remain. Recent studies underscore the link between life meaning and psychological well-being among university students (Onyekachi et al., 2023). However, most research has focused narrowly on individual factors, such as mental health, while overlooking the integrated impact of educational, familial, and social contexts on students' experiences. The concept of existential meaning has been explored in the context of international students, revealing the importance of cultural adaptation and academic success in fostering a sense of well-being (Oluwabusola et al., 2024). While studies have examined these factors individually, the comprehensive investigation of their combined influence remains underexplored (Schwartz et al., 2017). This study addresses this deficiency by offering a multidimensional analysis of the sense of meaninglessness among Chinese undergraduates, integrating insights from educational models, social media influences, peer competition, and family dynamics.

Research has shown that university students face existential crises worldwide due to increasing academic pressure and uncertain career prospects (Arnett, 2014; Steger & Frazier, 2005). For example, Sheldon et al. (2021) conducted a systematic review and meta-analysis, highlighting that mental health problems among university undergraduates are prevalent, with significant risk factors, including academic stress, social isolation, and future uncertainties. However, few studies have examined these issues within the context of Chinese higher education, where unique cultural and systemic factors may exacerbate students' sense of meaninglessness. For example, in China, the intense focus on academic achievement and pressure to secure stable careers can heighten existential anxieties among students (Xu, 2022). This study fills this gap by providing a comprehensive analysis grounded in the Chinese context.

Cultural and social factors significantly shape students' pursuit of meaning (Schwartz et al., 2017). In achievement-oriented cultures, students' life meaning is largely tied to academic success, which serves as both motivation and pressure. Conversely, in cultures valuing personal exploration and self-expression, students seek meaning through personal growth and creativity. Recent initiatives to bolster

students' sense of meaning have yielded positive results. Duffy et al. (2019) conducted a study on a meaning-centered intervention for university students, which notably increased their life meaning and purpose while reducing anxiety and depression. This suggests that targeted interventions can effectively address the existential issues faced by many students.

In summary, this study not only extends the global discourse on student existential crises but also addresses the deficiency in existing research by examining the combined influence of multiple factors on Chinese undergraduates' sense of meaninglessness. Adopting a holistic approach offers a more comprehensive understanding of the factors contributing to students' sense of meaninglessness. It highlights the need for tailored interventions to support their well-being and academic success.

METHOD

Design

This study utilized qualitative case study interviews to investigate the underlying causes of sense of meaninglessness among Chinese undergraduates and its impact on their academic achievement and psychological well-being. The participants were recruited from a "Double First-Class"[1] university in China via a combination of purposive and snowball sampling. The sampling criteria included the following: (1) participants must be full-time undergraduate students enrolled in regular programs, not continuing education; (2) participants should represent diverse grades and majors; and (3) gender balance was maintained to ensure a diverse and representative sample.

Table 1: Participants' information

Student code	Gender	Major	Year	Notes
A	Female	Math	Class of 2020	
C	Male	History	Class of 2022	
G	Female	Physical education	Class of 2021	
H1	Female	Physical education	Class of 2020	
H2	Male	Economic	Class of 2022	Innovation Class[2]
J	Female	Literature	Class of 2022	
M1	Male	Physics	Class of 2021	
M2	Male	Medicine	Class of 2022	Innovation Class
Q	Female	Law	Class of 2021	
S1	Male	Physics	Class of 2022	
S2	Female	Politic	Class of 2022	
W1	Female	History	Class of 2022	
W2	Female	Arts	Class of 2022	
Z1	Female	Arts	Class of 2021	
Z2	Male	Physics	Class of 2021	Innovation Class

Participant Recruitment and Coding

The participants were assigned pseudonyms to ensure anonymity and confidentiality. These pseudonyms were selected to reflect a balance between individuality and anonymity, ensuring that participants could not be identified through their codes. The pseudonyms were assigned on the basis of a combination of letters and numbers, with no direct correlation to the participants' real names or personal information. For example, participants were coded as "A," "C," "G," and "H1," among others. This coding system facilitated data management while protecting participants' privacy. The participants' information is summarized in Table 1.

Data Collection and Analysis

The participants were encouraged to discuss topics relevant to the research questions beyond the interview guide. Each participant underwent a single interview, which lasted approximately 90 minutes. Given the iterative nature of qualitative research, gathering all relevant information in a single interview is challenging. Therefore, we engaged in multiple rounds of informal follow-up inquiries with each participant to clarify, supplement, and confirm key information. All the interviews and informal communications were conducted in Chinese, the participants' native language, to ensure the comfort and accuracy of their expression.

The interviews were conducted in a one-on-one, semistructured format, either online or offline. The interview guide focused on three key questions: (1) What was your college life journey? (2) What factors influence your college experience? (3) How do these factors shape your college career? With the participants' consent, interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim to form a comprehensive dataset.

We employed a three-tier coding method via NVivo 12 software for data analysis. The process included (1) open coding to identify initial conceptual categories, resulting in 60 initial codes; (2) axial coding to establish connections between categories, refining them into 18 axial codes; and (3) selective coding to synthesize these into four core categories that captured the essence of the findings. The detailed results of the three-tier coding process are presented in Table 2. We conducted additional interviews with five more undergraduates via the same sampling method to ensure theoretical saturation. The absence of new codes in these follow-up interviews confirmed that theoretical saturation had been achieved. Throughout the process, we ensured the rigor of our qualitative analysis by maintaining detailed coding memos and regularly reviewing the coding framework.

Table 2: Tertiary coding results

Theme	Category	Open coding	Number of nodes
1. The Paradox of Autonomy and Control in University Curriculum and Assessment Systems	1.1 Bridging high school and college	Looking forward to college before going to it.	5
		In a state of self-denial because of failure in the college entrance exam.	3
		Feeling lost and anxious when starting university.	13
		Enormous gap between reality and ideal.	12
		Gradually moving away from the dreams I once had.	2
	1.2 Regulatory campus	Colleges construct enormous quantitative systems.	9
		Heavy course load squeezes out after-school time.	15
		Forced participation in "formalistic" activities.	6
	1.3 Current situation	Strategic course selection behavior.	6
		Alienation of the curriculum under the assessment system.	10
		Busy but don't know why.	8
		Teachers can't do anything about the "bird course."[3]	5
		Ubiquitous and vicious competition.	10
		Struggling with "bird course" and enduring in silence.	16
		Do what you love.	13
	1.4 State of mind	Cater to the rule.	6
		Continuing the high school mindset.	8
		Academic burnout, desire to escape.	11
		Follow the crowd blindly, drift along.	3
		Fear of missing out.	3
		Confused about the present and the future.	3
		Questioning the effort.	6
		Embracing reality, planning for the future.	5

		Keep exploring and believe in the future.	8
2. The Anxiety of Simplification: How Social Media Shapes University Life	2.1 Peer pressure	Feeling pressure in comparison to successful people.	3
	2.2 Interpersonal relationships	Poor interpersonal relations in the context of competition, leading to a crisis of confidence.	2
		Find comfort in finding similar groups on social media platforms.	3
		Keeping in touch with people through social media.	1
	2.3 Time investment	Wasting a lot of time on social media and deserting your studies.	4
		Forced to work during breaks to process information.	2
	2.4 Lessons learned	Trapped in an information cocoon.	6
		Drawing on the Internet for resources and fun.	2
	2.5 Life Anxiety	Monitoring every aspect of life, spreading anxiety of all kinds.	2
	2.6 Psychosocial comfort	Be more comfortable with your words and actions on the Internet.	2
		Pouring out your heart through social media to get rid of negative emotions.	3
	2.7 Judgment	There is a lot of information that needs to be analyzed and judged carefully.	4
		Resource allocation follows the head effect.	1
3. Hidden Competitiveness and Peer Alienation	3.1 Peer relations	Peer relationships become strained.	9
	3.2 Ideological contradiction	Swinging between struggling and "lying flat."[4]	6
		Wear a mask to hide your low self-esteem and panic.	4
		The more you get, the less you feel.	5
		Doing things you don't like for the sake of rankings and roundups.	8

		Ashamed to learn, ashamed to compete.	1
	3.3 Competitive environment	Comparison from cultural traditions.	15
		Feeling small because of someone else's excellence.	3
		Fighting alone in the dark is the most torturous.	4
	4.1 Family expectations	Psychological pressure from high family expectations.	13
		Relaxed, free family atmosphere.	8
		Lack of emotional education and companionship leads to introversion and forced independence.	11
	4.2 Upbringing	No support for the development of hobbies and interests outside of studies.	2
4. The Persistent Influence of Family Expectations		Parents provide companionship and teach by example.	4
		Parents respect their children's ideas.	7
		Repressive upbringing forces one to be a perfectionist.	11
		Insufficient understanding and respect from parents.	6
	4.3 Comparison of members	Comparison of family ranges.	4
		Comparison within the family.	2
	4.4 College application	Catering to the needs of parents in choosing a major.	4
		Conflicts in selecting university majors reflect intergenerational conflicts.	3

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Theme 1: The Paradox of Autonomy and Control in University Curriculum and Assessment Systems: Navigating the Involutionary Landscape

Given the intense pressure of the National College Entrance Examination, Chinese college students are often told during their high school years that once they enter university, everything becomes easier and virtually stress free. However, the participants reported that university life sharply diverged from their secondary school imaginings and elders' tales. This gap arises from a disciplined

educational model designed to align students with set standards, both academically and behaviorally. Universities, perpetuating this regimen, wield influence through rigorous assessments, molding students into compliant figures, contrary to the liberty they expected.

It is true that undergraduates have more autonomy than they did during their primary and secondary school years. However, because of their educational purpose, colleges are bound to use the power of discipline, in other words, a large quantitative assessment and evaluation system, to intervene with students to a certain extent. The term "discipline" in this context follows Foucault's definition, which is that "to discipline" means bringing a person into conformity with one's wishes, not only in terms of "what to do" but also in terms of "how to do it," thus creating a well-trained and controlled individual (Foucault, 1995).

Philosopher Byung-Chul Han asserts that the 21st century has shifted from a disciplinary to a merit-based society (Han, 2015). Despite universities' efforts to develop more scientific and comprehensive educational models, undergraduates often focus on GPA enhancement. The imported credit system, designed to liberate students from the traditional academic year's rigidity and empower choice, has instead led to strategic course selection in China to optimize GPAs. According to social learning theory, behaviors are emulated when they are perceived as rewarded (O'Fallon & Butterfield, 2012). Consequently, students, including those who previously disregarded grades, now choose less demanding courses to increase their GPA. GPAs are also closely related to how the course is assessed. H1 observed:

> From classroom responses to homework grading and from attendance registers to final exams, these all constitute a complete set of assessment criteria. To further complicate matters, there is an invisible set of criteria on top of the criteria, which depends on whether the phenomenon of involution in one's class is strong (H1).

Regardless of which subject they face, many undergraduate students have become slaved to obtain scores. The classroom, which was intended to promote the free exchange of ideas, has become a tool for undergraduate students to obtain their desired scores. They become passive learners and pursue high GPAs that yield tangible benefits.

The quality of the undergraduate curriculum has become a hot topic today (O'Shea, 2016). The Chinese Ministry of Education has long required universities to eliminate "bird courses" and create "gold courses"[5] to improve teaching quality (The Chinese Ministry of Education, 2018). However, many participants mentioned their struggles with "bird courses. "

> After a few years, I can only vaguely remember the numbness and indifference on most of the students' faces when the teacher shared Chicken Soup for the Soul that sounded a bit unappealing, and it was obvious that she only touched herself (H1).

Owing to the bias in the policy orientation of colleges in terms of faculty performance, the early professional training and socialization of teachers make them more inclined to be scholars than pedagogues (Jonbekova, 2020). The distribution of compensation within colleges tends to favor research results over teaching quality (Fairweather & Rhoads, 1995). Therefore, teachers always have excellent research skills but insufficient teaching skills. Although the student evaluation system gives students the right to provide feedback, this is just a formality.

The majority of participants were critical of the university's learning approach, yet they unknowingly embraced its norms. The institutional process dictates a clear directive: "Invest time in activities that yield high grades" (Liao & Xiao, 2022). Despite the often distressing nature of this regimen, students in this "involutional"[6] era remain voiceless, enduring the emptiness of their undergraduate experience (Ajjawi et al., 2021). When trapped by formidable barriers, they find themselves immobile, with dim prospects for future success.

Theme 2: Anxiety of Simplification: How Social Media Shapes University Life

Undergraduates, as members of Generation Z residing in the academic "ivory tower," are increasingly confronted with society's complexities through social media (Arora et al., 2020). This dual existence in both the real and virtual realms, while adaptive for this generation, also engenders unique challenges and anxieties not faced by previous ones. The crux lies in social media's oversimplified portrayal of university life, which spawns diverse anxieties.

In the context of internet information, a new anxiety symptom, fear of missing out (FoMO), is common among young people, including undergraduate students. The cognitive psychologist Przybylski defines FoMO as "a widespread anxiety that occurs when individuals fail to gain access to what they want to know about an absent event, which mainly manifests itself as a desire to continuously know what others are doing" (Przybylski et al., 2013). In their interview transcripts, the participants wrote that they hoped to connect with society beyond campus through social media, such as WeChat and MicroBlog, to learn about the outside world. W1 said:

> I consider myself a person who is not very likely to be influenced by other information, but to avoid detours, I will learn from the experiences and methods of people who have already succeeded in doing certain things I want to do (W1).

Big data has also pinpointed this mentality and frequently pushes out various "experience tips." This kind of text, with eye-catching headlines, not only generates much network traffic but also spreads anxiety (Senter, M. S.T 2023). Undergraduates lack self-judgment, and fragmented information on the internet has extended its reach into every aspect of life (Steger and Frazier 2005), forcing them to join a never-ending competition to maintain social connections.

The development of social media has been accompanied by the rise of marketing accounts. These low-threshold, profit-oriented self-media platforms have become a significant force in the field of online public opinion. However, they have also been identified as a major factor contributing to the spiritual depletion faced by undergraduates. Currently, the official accounts of universities (similar to official accounts on platforms such as Facebook), which are intended to showcase their unique characteristics, have to some extent adopted the traits of marketing accounts, engaging in repetitive self-interested behaviors. Q said:

> More than once, I have seen that a certain student won the national scholarship for three consecutive years and was directly admitted to a famous school; a certain student had dozens of courses with perfect grades..... In the beginning, I would always read with curiosity and inquisitiveness. However, this kind of publicity is just too frequent. Now I just feel like these articles are selling anxiety (Q).

The existence of social media amplifies the few winners on a single track of evaluation and introduces ordinary people into an information cocoon. Society seems to be less inclusive, and the overwhelming template of success has disturbed the peace of ordinary people. As M1 puts it,

> Ultimately, regardless of how hard students work, the number of top students is limited, and ordinary students constitute the majority. It is not realistic to turn everyone into academic achievers. We should pay attention to the beautiful aspects of the lives of ordinary students, which can relieve me (M1).

At the same time, ordinary people have been given the same right to speak. According to Irving Goffman's theory of mimesis, individuals present themselves in a completely planned manner, purely for the purpose of creating a certain impression among others, so that they respond in a particular expected manner (Goffman, 1990). When social media is used for self-presentation, those students who want to create a perfect persona for themselves will create a selective narrative of reality, packaging their mimetic selves with elaborate videos or pictures. The mimetic self is packaged in sophisticated videos or pictures. However, the cotemporal comparisons brought by social networks magnify the differences between ordinary people and perfect people in the network. The phenomenon of "posttruth" places ordinary people in a highly competitive and relatively disadvantaged position, where the subjective effect of emotions often obscures the truth, making it difficult for individuals to recognize it. This phenomenon triggers anxiety and low self-esteem, putting students in a difficult situation of social identity and passive participation in involution.

Theme 3: Hidden Competitiveness and Peer Alienation: Cultural Quagmire from Involution to Reclinationism

The landscape of peer relationships in colleges is often overshadowed by covert competition, which not only manifests in academic and employment arenas

but also profoundly shapes interpersonal dynamics. The participants frequently described experiencing competitive shame and learning shame, rooted in an excessive focus on personal competitiveness and a pervasive fear of judgment from others.

Many participants reported holding multiple student leadership positions, such as presidents or ministers, and engaging in numerous activities. These efforts were driven by the desire to achieve better end-of-semester evaluations, secure higher rankings, and win scholarships. However, for these students, scholarships and honors were not the ultimate goals; instead, they served as a means to increase competitiveness and vie for scarce resources. In an era where modern society no longer guarantees stable employment for young people, replaced by a flexible and ever-changing career landscape (Liao & Xiao, 2022), education has shifted from a pursuit of spiritual cultivation to a utilitarian investment. Higher education has become a tool for overcoming competitors, acquiring resources and opportunities, and ultimately securing advantageous professions and social mobility.

However, in the context of finite resources, the struggle for social resources at the individual level appears futile from a collective perspective. While those who work harder may gain more resources, society as a whole pays the price for this intensified effort (Wang et al., 2022). The involution caused by irrational competition is merely a symptom; its root lies in the imbalanced resource allocation system.

As a result, the means of competition have become boundless. Beyond overt competition, a secretive battleground has emerged. To conceal their true efforts from peers, students resort to studying in secluded self-learning rooms and libraries, participating in team competitions without drawing attention, and even taking measures such as covering their electronic devices with film and draping curtains around their desks to prevent observation. This behavior not only heightens the tension and coldness in peer relationships but also creates an atmosphere of constant vigilance. Under the pressure of competition, some undergraduates become highly stressed and sensitive, feeling trapped in a walled city where minor external events can cause significant psychological turmoil and harm.

In response, the “anti-involution” movement and the theory of reclinationism—a form of student banter—have rapidly gained popularity on college campuses. Reclinationism, in essence, is a marginal way of life that acknowledges the dominance of the involution trend (Wang, 2021). However, under the guise of “anti-involution,” all efforts are indiscriminately criticized and labeled “invective. “Competitors face the additional risk of being ridiculed for their learning behaviors, leading to a reluctance to display their strengths and aspirations (Heintzelman & King, 2019). This is because, in the current climate, effort is easily stigmatized, and even the normal completion of learning tasks can be exaggerated and demonized. To avoid ostracization and isolation, many students feel compelled to adopt a persona of “indifference to fame and fortune,” avoiding discussions about their studies and competitive pursuits with friends in public. They hope to blend in as ordinary students. These individuals are also beginning to experience a lack of existential security. They strive to close

themselves off but suffer from "engulfment anxiety" (Laing, 1994), fearing being understood and thus avoiding any form of attention. As Z1 described,

> Many people are ostracized and isolated for fear of letting others know that they are secretly working hard, as if self-improvement has become an unspeakable sin (Z1).

Theme 4: The Persistent Influence of Family Expectations: Navigating the Transition from Support to Stress

Although university life is typically associated with reduced family influence, participants' interview transcripts revealed that the expectations, educational approaches, and interpersonal dynamics of their original families continue to significantly shape their emotional well-being. They describe a tense family environment where minor issues can lead to significant distress, highlighting the ongoing impact on their families.

Family conflict over the process of completing applications was particularly prominent. Four of the nine participants from the teacher education program indicated that choosing that major fulfilled their parents' expectations, but they harbored confusion and doubts about the choice (Steger and Frazier, 2005). Influenced by traditional employment concepts, parents often believe that their children are ill equipped to navigate changing industries and insist on stable, secure careers. Students, however, perceive these views as stereotypical, arrogant, and biased. They prefer to pursue professions they are passionate about, believing that they can have a significant effect on their abilities and enthusiasm (Onyekachi et al., 2023).

With the information revolution and digitalization of society, the traditional inheritance model dominated by elder authority is gradually being replaced. Elderly individuals increasingly seek psychological compensation from the younger generation, and their control diminishes (Gao & Li, 2022). Young people are fighting for their rights and striving for more autonomy. However, differences in ideology, values, and cultural preferences (Wu, 2006) make intergenerational conflict inevitable. The rigid attitudes of parents and the resistance of children to their authority have disrupted normal communication. As G said,

> I feel like I can't communicate with my mom. She disagrees with me without even listening to my ideas. I feel powerless, so I choose to solve and bear everything on my own because it's useless even if I talk to her about it (G).

A lack of family support and intimacy leads to continuous internal conflict. Several participants reported that the face-saving culture in Asian culture makes parents always have high expectations and that they have to force themselves to be "perfectionists". This leads to great stress and anxiety (Suh et al., 2022). "Perfectionists can be categorized as passivism, optimism, and nonperfectionism" (Chen et al., 2013). Unreasonable parental expectations, combined with students' irrational interpretations of social expectations and their reliance on external evaluations, can erode their self-worth and self-efficacy, leading them to set

unrealistically high personal standards. For example, M2's father constantly praised her classmates, fostering a sense of "negative perfectionism. " She noted:

> Every time I take a test, I force myself to come in first; otherwise, I will be a loser again (M2).

The participants also attributed competitive anxiety to parental criticism. Rooted in the Confucian tradition of "father guides son," the idea that parents are the ultimate authority is deeply ingrained. G, who grew up in a family that practiced repressive education, was criticized by her mother for four hours for scoring only 99 points on a test. Research has shown the negative effects of such parenting styles on college students. Overprotective and rejecting parenting modes can instill irrational beliefs, leading to maladaptation (Hua et al., 2022). Although parents may intend to encourage rather than suppress, this style, which ignores independent personality, can decrease students' motivation and lower their sense of self-identity. In summary, the participants revealed multiple ways in which family dynamics contribute to inner anxiety and feelings of meaninglessness. Parents, as adults, should tolerate their children's anxiety and transform it into "creative energy" for healthy development. However, the reality is often the opposite: parents transmit their anxiety to their children. The family, which should provide emotional comfort, becomes a source of mental violence and a catalyst for internal conflict and anxiety among undergraduate students. This reverse transmission of anxiety requires students not only to cope with the expectations and goals imposed by their parents but also to manage their parents' negative emotions.

DISCUSSION

In conclusion, the sense of meaninglessness among undergraduates is a multifaceted issue involving educational policies, family dynamics, social media influences, and societal expectations. This study approaches these challenges from a holistic systems perspective, emphasizing the interconnections and interactions between various factors, and proposes the following advice:

To address the lack of meaning among college students, universities need to establish a comprehensive support system that not only includes academic guidance but also should cover mental health services and career planning (Abu Khadra et al., 2025). This comprehensive support system can help students better adapt to college life and enhance their sense of well-being and meaning. Additionally, strengthening communication and collaboration between families and schools to support students' growth jointly through parent workshops and family counseling helps parents better understand students' psychological needs. Adopting multidimensional assessment models that evaluate not only academic performance but also mental health, social skills, and career readiness provides more personalized support and guidance for students. Finally, social media can be utilized for positive mental health promotion and career development activities, and students can be provided with a positive environment for communication and support through online communities.

These findings are significant for China and provide insights for educational institutions in other countries facing similar challenges. By adopting these recommendations, institutions can better support students' academic and personal development, creating a more meaningful university experience. Future research should explore specific interventions targeting student well-being and academic success, with a focus on cross-cultural comparisons to identify universally effective strategies.

Notes

1. An acronym for first-class universities and disciplines worldwide. This is another national strategy in China's higher education after Project 211 and Project 985.
2. This study examines a university's approach to fostering exceptional students by selectively grouping academically superior individuals into a specialized class for customized talent development aimed at nurturing elite talent for national needs.
3. This is a Western term for easy college courses. The water courses referred to by Chinese undergraduates are usually those with loose classroom management, lack practical value, and high course grades, which are conducive to students' success in obtaining credit.
4. A person who rejects the involution and tends to slack off after watching their friends works themselves to death.
5. Gold courses refer to first-class courses. This does not mean that the curriculum resources are rich or meet some external evaluation standards but that the courses can help college students engage in in-depth learning in the classroom. First, the courses themselves have depth, difficulty, and challenge. Second, teachers are engaged in teaching and thinking, which makes students feel a sense of gain.
6. This is the trend of internal competition mentioned earlier.

Acknowledgment

In the preparation of this manuscript, we utilized artificial intelligence (AI) tools for content creation with the following capacity:

- ☐ None
- ☑ Some sections, with minimal or no editing
- ☐ Some sections, with extensive editing
- ☐ Entire work, with minimal or no editing
- ☐ Entire work, with extensive editing

This article incorporates content generated by artificial intelligence (AI) tools, specifically for the purpose of grammatical error detection and correction. The use of AI tools complied with ethical standards and guidelines for academic integrity. The final content has been thoroughly reviewed and edited to ensure accuracy, relevance, and adherence to academic standards.

Funding

This research was funded by the China National Social Science Fund (Education Specialization). (No. BIA210183); the project of Ningbo Institute of Higher Education Performance Research in 2023 (Project No. JY2023JYP01); the commissioned research project of Ningbo Educational Science Research Institute (Project No. HX2024000036)

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Author bios

HEYUAN WANG is an associate Professor at the Institute of Higher Education, Ningbo University, 818 Fenghua Road, Jiangbei District, Ningbo, Zhejiang, China. His research interests are the sociology of education and informal institutions in education. Email: wangheyuan@nbu.edu.cn

QINGQUAN QIU is an undergraduate student at the College of Teacher Education, Ningbo University, 818 Fenghua Road, Jiangbei District, Ningbo, Zhejiang, China. Her research interests include higher education studies. 2430952459@qq.com

JIAYAO ZHU is an undergraduate student at the College of Teacher Education, Ningbo University, 818 Fenghua Road, Jiangbei District, Ningbo, Zhejiang, China. Her research interests include higher education studies. 2586285258@qq.com

QINGQING GE is an undergraduate student at the College of Teacher Education, Ningbo University, 818 Fenghua Road, Jiangbei District, Ningbo, Zhejiang, China. Her research interests include higher education studies. 3198479612@qq.com

CLAYTON SMITH is a Professor at the Faculty of Education, University of Windsor, 401 Sunset Avenue, Windsor, Ontario, Canada, with research interests in student development. Email: Clayton.Smith@uwindsor.ca

WENQIAN DING is a Graduate student at the College of Teacher Education, Ningbo University, 818 Fenghua Road, Jiangbei District, Ningbo, Zhejiang, China, with research interests in the sociology of education and higher education research. Email: dingwenqian5@gmail.com

GAN DONGHAI is a Researcher at the Ningbo Education Bureau, 168 Renmin Road, Ningbo, Zhejiang, China, with research interests in the sociology of education and higher education research. Email: gandonghai 2023@hotmail.com