

Original article

Managerialist policies and sustainable student development: Well-being challenge

Shaohan Yang¹, Yuxi He², Yuxi Jiang², Jiayin Shen², Siyan Wang², Yan Zhou³, Zhifang Liu¹, Heyuan Wang³

¹Department of Psychology, Ningbo University, Ningbo 315211, P. R. China

²School of Marxism, Ningbo University, Ningbo 315211, P. R. China

³School of Teacher Education, Ningbo University, Ningbo 315211, P. R. China

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Abstract: This study explores the complex relationship between undergraduate students' well-being and the demands of managerialism in higher education from a grounded theory perspective. Drawing on well-being theories, it examines students' perceptions and lived experiences in the challenging academic environments of Chinese universities. Through a comprehensive literature review and semi-structured interviews, the study reveals pervasive tensions and challenges that significantly undermine students' well-being, often leaving it systematically overlooked. The findings indicate that undergraduates' educational conceptualizations and self-actualization are heavily influenced by an inflexible educational framework, intense peer competition, and an insular information ecosystem, all reinforced by a performance-oriented managerial culture. The study highlights the need to critically reassess existing managerialist educational policies and advocates for a more inclusive, student-centered approach. Addressing systemic shortcomings, cultivating supportive peer networks, and breaking down information barriers are crucial steps toward improving student well-being. By advancing a methodological framework that accommodates the diverse needs of undergraduate students, this study contributes to the discourse on the managerial impact on student well-being and provides critical insights for policy reform aimed at comprehensive student development.

Keywords: Higher education reform; student well-being; academic stress; peer relationships; information cocoon; undergraduate mental health

1. Introduction

Ball's (2003) policy-technical framework shows managerialism makes individuals internalize institutional goals via self-discipline and collectivism. It's validated among teachers but also extended to students in China's comprehensive quality assessment. The 2005 Ministry of Education policy included extracurricular activities and volunteer services in student evaluation, creating a student managerial mechanism. Englund & Gerdin (2019) noted the "self-management illusion" where students prove worth through standardized records and grades. This turns education into an auditable process, alienating students from knowledge exploration to objects of development meeting management standards.

Managerialism impacts students through dual discipline: policy documents set an "all-round development" standard, while assessment systems convert it into quantifiable indicators. This incorporates student development into a preset framework, reducing personality traits to symbolic codes. Ball's theory (2016) that "policy technologies reshape participant identities" applies here as students redefine self-development paths under managerialism's logic. This aligns with China's educational structure, where a large student base and scarce resources turn competitive pressures into self-motivation via "free choice". The focus on managerial efficiency skews educational values, replacing the humanistic dimension with a performance-driven approach as students accumulate evidence for "excellence".

Although existing research has paid insufficient attention to the impact of managerialism on student populations, the extended application of policy technology theory reveals a profound mechanism of action. This implicit shaping not only changes students' behavioral patterns, but also reconstructs the identities and values of educational

participants at a deeper level, making what Ball (2016) describes as “changing the nature of education” tangibly present in the student population.

2. Literature review

2.1 Manifestations of unhappiness among college students

According to the 2022 Survey on the Mental Health of College Students, the stress of college students mainly comes from academics, interpersonal relationships and future employment, which can lead to low mood, fatigue and even a sense of powerlessness, which in turn reduces well-being. Anxiety and depression symptoms are prominent manifestations of unhappiness among college students, and they are also a more serious part of mental health problems. According to the 2020 China College Student Health Survey Report, many college students face psychological distress, such as academic pressure, life anxiety, interpersonal anxiety and even depression. A 2022 systematic review study showed that the prevalence of anxiety and depressive symptoms increased by 39% and 33.6% (Li Zhao & Chen, 2022), respectively, among college students. Studies have shown that life, interpersonal, and academic anxiety is negatively associated with well-being, especially in school settings, where interpersonal social anxiety is particularly pronounced (Zou et al., 2024. Tian Dai, 2012).

College students who are unhappy are more likely to fall into negative cognitive patterns, which affect their interpretation of events and emotional reactions, and their self-efficacy is also lower, which may lead to a lack of confidence in the face of challenges and a lower experience of well-being. The explicit behavior of this unhappiness is prominently manifested in the polarization of "involution" and "lying flat". Some students invest more time and energy in pursuit of better grades and resources, but when their investment and return are not proportional, it will exacerbate their psychological pressure, leading to unhappiness and even mental illness (Ma Xiaohua, 2023. Zhang Wen, 2024). However, college students who "lie flat" have long avoided study tasks, and even escaped from reality by indulging in online media, making them show social withdrawal, avoidance and even social anxiety. A statistic in the United States shows that college students who use social media for a long time have above-average rates of depression (Kelly & Sharot, 2024).

The unhappiness of college students is mainly manifested in the confusion and deviation of the outlook on life and values of future career planning. Foreign studies have shown that individuals with a higher sense of meaning in life experience a lower risk of depression and anxiety; Conversely, individuals with a lower sense of meaning in life tend to have fewer positive emotions and feelings of happiness in life (Sternthal, Williams, Musick, & Buck, 2010); A study of Australian participants also showed a negative correlation between the search for meaning and subjective well-being (Cohen & Cairns, 2012).

2.2 Causes of unhappiness manifestations

The unhappiness of contemporary college students has shown a multi-dimensional spreading trend, from the continuous deterioration of mental health, the alienation of learning behavior, and even the hollowing out of the meaning of future development, which jointly constructs the "hidden crisis" of the sustainable development of higher education. The causal mechanism is composed of multiple factors.

In the field of contemporary higher education, the psychological manifestations of college students' unhappiness show progressive characteristics, which are rooted in the interaction of stressors under multiple systems. Based on the background of the performanceist higher education system, the academic pressure and employment competition pressure brought about by the quantitative evaluation system lead to college students being in a stressful environment of forced involution, and their cortisol levels are abnormally increased, and the normalization of this physiological response induces psychological symptoms such as sleep disorders. Studies have shown that patients with insomnia score lower on subjective well-being (Hirotsu et al., 2015), sleep events and quality affect an individual's mental health, and may further reduce well-being through social support and coping strategies (Wang, 2021). When the stress cannot be relieved, the individual's ability to regulate emotions is impaired, and the state of "hard work but no joy" is the learning state. Studies have found that emotion regulation is an important component of social and emotional competence, and it reduces an individual's unhappiness by enhancing positive emotions (Quoidbach et al., 2015).

On the other hand, compared with individual psychological factors, stressors caused by the social environment are often also important factors affecting individual unhappiness. The "performance performance" brought by the academic industry, the "academic competition" brought by parents' expectations, and the "professional short-sightedness" brought by social competition have all put college students in an accelerated era. The phenomenon of academic involution spawned by managerial policies makes students' practice take on the characteristics of "foreground" as mentioned in Goffman's (1959) mimetic theory. Students achieve the core purpose by accurately calculating the scores of the assessment system (Williamson, 2017) and carefully designing the learning trajectory, which is especially reflected in the research system under the higher education system. Social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) revealed that students' sense of continuous relative deprivation in the process of competition would reduce their well-being.

3. Research Design

The qualitative research paradigm focuses on the meaning construction of individuals when they participate

in social life. Thus, this study adopts the research method of semi-structured interview to explore undergraduate students' perceptions and experiences well-being in challenging learning and living environments. It uses the researcher as a research tool to obtain information and create understanding through intersubjectivity by interacting with research participants in a natural setting. This study explores undergraduate students' judgments and perceptions of happiness and their responses to it by examining the perspectives of individual students. It aims to present the influencing factors and underlying reasons for undergraduate students' happiness or unhappiness in the Chinese context.

3.1 Sampling

In this study, a combination of theoretical and convenience sampling strategies was used to select participants whose experiences and perspectives aligned with the key conceptual categories explored (Morse, 2007). The sample size of 18 participants was determined based on the research objectives and the nature of the study, ensuring that the sample was large enough to provide rich and diverse data while maintaining the feasibility of qualitative analysis. Participants were recruited from five Top-Tier universities in southern China, known for their academic and research excellence. The recruitment methods included institutional email invitations, social media outreach, and engagement within targeted academic networks. Specific criteria for participant selection included being a current undergraduate student and the ability to clearly and insightfully describe their college campus experience. This approach ensured a diverse and representative sample within the Chinese undergraduate student population (Table 1).

3.2 Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted between January 2023 and May 2024. The interviews were designed to explore the subjective experiences and perceptions of undergraduate students' well-being. The interview protocol was carefully designed around the study's research questions and iteratively refined based on preliminary interview data to ensure the relevance and depth of the inquiry. The interviews centered on three key guiding questions: (1) Do you feel happy? (2) What factors influence your happiness, and how do you understand and interpret these factors? (3) Have you made any efforts or taken actions to improve your happiness? This structured yet flexible approach allowed for a rich exploration of the students' lived experiences, ensuring that the sample provided meaningful insights into the broader phenomenon of student well-being.

3.3 Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis with the aid of Nvivo 20 software. The interviews were transcribed verbatim, and the transcripts were coded and themed through an iterative process. Initially, the research team conducted the first round of coding by identifying, extracting, and summarizing the factors influencing "college students' well-being," based solely on the information derived from the interview transcripts. After each iteration of coding, the team compared the new codes with previous transcripts to ensure consistency and the validity of the emerging coding framework. Subsequently, through repeated reading and in-depth group discussions, the first-level codes were refined, and second-level codes were established. This iterative process was then applied to further refine the second-level codes into coherent and logically structured third-level codes, culminating in the creation of a comprehensive analytical framework. To ensure the rigor of the analysis, multiple researchers were involved in the coding process, and inter-coder reliability was regularly assessed and discussed. Data saturation was achieved when no new themes emerged in the later interviews, confirming the robustness and completeness of the analysis.

3.4 During Ethical Considerations

In qualitative research, ethical challenges frequently emerge during data collection and the presentation of findings, often shaped by the dynamics between the researcher and participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 261). This study strictly adhered to the principle of informed consent. Ethical approval was obtained from the data protection department of Ningbo University. Invitations extended to participants provided detailed explanations of the study's aims, the interview outline, and the data collection procedures. Participants were informed about the study's purpose, the voluntary nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw at any time. Data collection commenced only after participants gave their explicit verbal consent, ensuring their voluntary engagement in the research process.

To safeguard participant confidentiality, all personal identifiers have been fully anonymized in the presentation of the study's findings and conclusions. Qualitative research is inherently a co-constructive process between researcher and participants, involving continuous reflection and scrutiny not only of the data but also of the researchers' own positionality, the participants, and the contextual influences surrounding them (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). Throughout the data collection phase, the research team made concerted efforts to minimize power imbalances and reduce the psychological distance in interactions with participants (Dodgson, 2019), thereby fostering a collaborative and conducive environment for open dialogue and knowledge exchange.

As an expression of gratitude, each participant received compensation in the form of a gift card or cash equivalent to approximately \$10, redeemable for select online bookstore purchases, literature download services, and online media access.

Table 1. Participant labels and descriptive characteristics

| Name | Gender | Age | Grade |
|------|--------|-----|-----------|
| A | F | 20 | Sophomore |
| B | F | 22 | Senior |
| C | M | 21 | Junior |
| D | M | 21 | Junior |
| E | F | 21 | Junior |
| F | F | 21 | Junior |
| G | F | 21 | Junior |
| H | F | 21 | Junior |
| I | M | 21 | Junior |
| J | F | 20 | Sophomore |
| K | F | 20 | Sophomore |
| L | F | 20 | Sophomore |
| M | F | 20 | Sophomore |
| N | F | 20 | Sophomore |
| O | M | 21 | senior |
| P | M | 22 | senior |
| Q | M | 22 | senior |
| R | M | 22 | senior |

4. Findings

To provide a clearer understanding of the themes and categories that emerged from the data, Table 2 below summarizes the main themes, their respective categories, the number of participants represented by each category, and sample quotations from participants.

4.1 The Mismatch Between Training Models and Student Expectations: Phenomenon of Misalignment in Higher Education

The statements made by 18 undergraduates highlight a core problem in higher education. According to them, the current training modes of these institutions do not align with their learning methods or thinking habits. Consequently, they are not adequately prepared to become autonomous learners, resulting in low self-efficiency and ultimately lower self-happiness. One student, G shared the following:

Although I had made sufficient preparations before starting college, I was still caught off guard by the challenges I faced. I had thought about becoming a class cadre¹ and joining certain societies and student organizations, but I was not prepared for the difficulties to be faced at the start of the college journey. (G)

Although undergraduate education requires a high-quality curriculum, there are still many low-quality courses, also known as “water courses,” that do not add any value to students and are often confusing. Scholars divide “water courses” into two categories: one where the teacher is tired, slacking, and not preparing lessons seriously, and the other where the course lacks practical value, has loose classroom management, and is out of touch with the current times. These low-quality courses fail to provide the necessary knowledge, collision of ideas, and pleasure of acquiring knowledge that students require to become autonomous learners. As a result, too many such courses lead undergraduates to adopt a passive and evasive attitude toward their education. F complained,

Most courses sound like an obvious waste of time and life; some teachers’ curricula never seem to be updated. I had to squint to make out the Powerpoint with white characters on a green background, and my eyes hurt, but no one brought up this issue, and neither did I; we all endured it in silence. When I reached the threshold, I would escape, and then I learned to skip class. (F)

There is a notable disjunction between the theoretical framework of university curricula and their practical implementation. Objectives and assessments within the curriculum often become marginalized as examination-centric pedagogies and utilitarian principles take precedence. Despite a prevailing consensus among higher education stakeholders regarding the paramount importance of nurturing students’ cognitive faculties, such as critical thinking and innovative acumen, the actualization of these aspirations frequently regresses into conventional exam-driven instructional methodologies. This examination-centric paradigm tends to disregard the significance of process-oriented evaluation, focusing solely on outcomes, thereby potentially undermining undergraduate students’ holistic learning experiences and overall well-being. When students habituated to prioritizing grades are instructed to merely commit key points to memory before examinations, they inevitably concentrate solely on attaining high marks, disregarding the rich learning opportunities embedded within the educational journey. This creates a

¹ In a university context, a “cadre” refers to the student leader of a class.

situation where grades take undue primacy as the sole measure of success, eclipsing the genuine essence of the learning endeavor. At the end of the term, K began to question his initial choice of major after the entrance exams.

What's the point of memorizing external utilitarian exam dumps? What are the names, years, and scientific formulas for ... just for the final assessment results? What can you learn and how much can you improve? It's not just this course, but also many other subjects. The course has nothing to do with ideological and political education, and the class is still very boring. There is much meaningless homework, which makes me doubt my chosen major and this school. I feel that I can't learn anything day by day, and my mood is gradually sinking. (K)

When external utilitarian forms of measurement and assessment such as GPA, comprehensive testing, and Youth Volunteer Hours² hold undergraduates hostage, their happiness is naturally low. N, who is deeply influenced by the idea that she must achieve good academic results, mentioned that,

To achieve a high GPA and compete in scientific research, I have to spend my weekends in the library and dare not rest. I am afraid that I will waste my time and it's even more tiring than high school. (N)

4.2 Alone in a Crowd: The Quest for Meaningful Peer Relationships

In modern society, school is the most important place of socialization for adolescents outside the family, and peer groups in schools are closely related to the development of adolescents. According to the Coleman Report, peer groups in schools have just as much influence on teenagers' development as parental involvement, teacher quality, and class size (Coleman, 1966). However, the lack of peer support, the maximization of peer interest competition, and other dislocation problems in the intermediary role of peer relations reduce undergraduates' happiness.

Lack of peer support leads to low emotional adaptability among undergraduates. Undergraduates are in the transitional stage between adolescence and adulthood, and positive peer relationships can significantly impact their happiness, particularly when they are under pressure. The support provided by positive peer relationships has an important protective effect on the emotions and behaviors of undergraduate students, which are closely related to their self-concept (Vaillancourt et al., 2013). Self-concept is the organizational system of self-perception and the way of looking at oneself, that is self-belief. Individuals' self-perceptions often originate in interpersonal interactions. The more care and support undergraduates receive from their peers in their studies and lives, the more optimistic their self-perception is, the more positive their belief in their ability to regulate their emotions, and the higher their happiness levels. Therefore, the more support they receive from their peers, the smoother their emotional adjustment will be. However, undergraduate students in top-tier universities do not receive sufficient peer support. Being alone is often the norm. As classmate B recalled,

I thought I would be able to make more like-minded friends and develop many precious friendships when I went to college. However, in reality, even students in the same class may not talk to each other after a semester of classes. If you don't participate in any clubs or other organizational activities, the only people you may get along well with in college are the other three roommates in your dormitory. And that's if the roommates have a good relationship. Looking back on the two and a half years since I went to college, those I can call my real friends are very few, and they are not in the same class as me or the same college. Most of the time, we all have our courses to attend, our own things to be busy with, usually only see each other a few times, and occasionally on weekends or festivals or after the exams, we will go out to get together. That is to say, in fact, university is far from being as lively as we imagined when we were in high school. I often feel very lonely. (B)

Many undergraduate students at top-tier universities lack sufficient peer support to help them cope with negative emotional events. As a result, they often feel like they are fighting alone and struggle to adjust their emotional state. They may not have the self-confidence to use effective emotional adjustment strategies and positive coping styles that can help them protect their emotional well-being. Furthermore, external events can often have a significant impact on their emotional state, making it difficult for them to adapt and maintain long-term happiness. N laughed at herself: "I never thought that I wouldn't even make a friend in a talented university and become a real 'orphan'."

The peer group differs from the individual or family as a structural contextual factor. Taking the peer group as a reference group for the purpose of social comparison has a negative impact on the happiness of undergraduates. When individuals perceive their peers as highly capable or successful, they may lower their own evaluations or their expectations for the future. Individuals will make self-assessments and decisions based on their relative position in the peer group and not according to their absolute ability. This underscores the fact that peer groups serve not only as companions but also as reflective surfaces for individual self-assessment. When peer groups exert substantial influence, individual comparative advantages diminish, potentially inducing a "depressive effect" whereby individuals subjectively depreciate their achievements or experience lowered self-esteem.

The overall ability level of the peer group is negatively correlated with students' self-evaluation of their academic performance. Specifically, the higher the ability level of the peer group is, the lower the students' self-evaluation of their academic performance is, and they also lack confidence in their studies. In intensely competitive environments, undergraduates enrolled in prestigious institutions find themselves amidst exceptionally talented

² **Youth Volunteer Hours:** It refers to the amount of time students spend volunteering in volunteer activities and is an indicator used to evaluate the overall quality of students.

peers, thereby predisposing them to internal cognitive conflicts characterized by self-doubt and self-negation. They are exhausted by the “involution³” and fierce competition, will be more sensitive to their relative position among peers, and may become more frustrated when they fall behind their peers, and their unhappiness will increase sharply. J, who was not selected for the innovative class of double-class universities, said frankly, “The fact that two students in the class passed the selection and entered Yangming class⁴ made me feel inferior.”

To cope with the huge peer pressure, classmates of A in the excellent class did not hesitate to behave in ways that adversely affected their health. She said helplessly,

This class brings together excellent students from different majors. Everyone has special tasks. Everyone works tirelessly, sometimes even at the cost of their physical health. The number of places guaranteed for research is limited, and this class also has a dynamic elimination mechanism. If you don't want to be kicked out, you can only study desperately and helplessly. Therefore, we are forced to give up many things. Whether you want to or not, people's energy is limited and the road is so narrow. We have no choice but to try our best to squeeze in and not kick out. (A)

Even though she studied hard like this, she claimed that her sense of happiness was still very low during the process.

4.3 The Dilemma of Information Overload: The Toll of the Information Cocoon on Student Well-being

In the information age, the rapid progress of Internet technology has become the core driving force to promote information development. According to the “51st Statistical Report on the Development of Internet in China” issued by the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC), “By the end of Dec. 2022, the number of netizens in China reached 1.067 billion, an increase of 35.49 million compared with that in December 2021, and the Internet penetration rate reached 75.6%, among which the number of short video users exceeded one billion, and the user utilization rate was as high as 96.5%” (CNNIC, 2023). Undergraduate network users enjoy the convenience of information brought by platforms such as WeChat, Weibo, and TikTok, and it is easy to passively fall into the habit of “selective exposure” because of their weak discernment of the quality of information. With the use of algorithmic recommendation technology, the process of selecting and accepting content that aligns with one's preferences has become more efficient. However, this has resulted in a standardization and homogenization of the information received, leading to a self-imposed “information cocoon.” Consequently, the joy of undergraduates trapped in this “information cocoon room” is declining. The so-called information cocoon is in the dissemination of information, users focus on topics they are interested in, creating “personal daily newspapers” ,thereby excluding or ignoring other viewpoint and content.

College students often have a sense of helplessness, and this feeling comes from the constraints of societal pressure to achieve success. Of course, like any other social media users, they have a specific reason for using media platforms. For those who are focused on self-improvement, searching for information is one of the primary motivations. However, when too many individuals search for the same development methods, social media algorithms pick up on these keywords and push more information and blog posts of the same type to undergraduates, which can overwhelm them. This trend can have implications for the way universities approach development for their students. As L, a new university student, mentioned,

“Templates for Success,” “Shortcuts,” “Bending the Curve,” and “Living the Dream.” This dizzying array of information wrapped around me really sometimes makes me question myself hard about what step went wrong that made the process of doing what I obviously wanted to do so torturous and painful. The starting point was wanting to take the road less traveled, and the result seemed to be more traveled and more time spent. (L)

Because of the dislocation of peer intermediary relationships in college, undergraduates lack the support of their peers and are eager to find a sense of identity in the virtual world. However, the various glamorous success templates presented on social media not only fail to provide positive support for undergraduates but also raise anxiety to a certain extent, limiting the choice of college life.

The big data always focuses on people's psychological anxiety. When you use your mobile phone, the media pushes glamorous material at you: so-and-so of the same age has won awards, and achievements, and received offers from many colleges or companies. It inevitably shares many successful experiences that seem too far away for us to contemplate achieving. I'm not the best at anything, so I always feel like they're better than me at everything, which undoubtedly gives me a lot of anxiety. Even though I normally don't care about these things, there will be a moment in the dead of the night when I suddenly reflect on whether or not I really am good enough. (I)

After temporarily “admiring” other people's successful life templates on social media platforms, undergraduates inevitably return to reality, where the negative emotions caused by the huge psychological gap ultimately lead to a lower sense of well-being.

On the other hand, undergraduates who lack discernment skills are trapped in an information cocoon and inundated with a large amount of homogenized information, which also greatly interferes with the future planning of undergraduates who are in the critical period of exploring the path of future self-development and are overly fearful of the uncertainty of the future. K, who was in this critical period, mentioned that :

³ **Involution:** refers to “excessive competition”

⁴ The name of the innovative class of double-class university.

Whenever I turn on my cell phone to seek help about my future, I see only graduate students exempted from exams, graduate students doing exams, and work, and I can't escape from these three roads. Slowly, my thinking seems to be limited here, and I can't think of any other way out for my future besides these three. Social media is like a cocoon of information, firmly trapping me in it, making me feel that I have no other choices but these three, because what I see on the Internet are only these and their detailed methods, and my thinking is unconsciously confined to this, and I don't even think about jumping out of it. (K)

The prevailing success paradigms propagated on social media platforms epitomize behaviors aligned with the prevailing evaluative framework. These behaviors, strategically tailored to conform to the dictates of the assessment system, serve as exemplars for undergraduates embarking on their future trajectories, thereby ensnaring them in a cruel predicament where academic grades reign supreme. However, these behaviors often diverge from undergraduate students' intrinsic desires and aspirations, thereby inducing cognitive dissonance. Consequently, undergraduates, grappling with the cognitive burden imposed by a deluge of information and value judgments experience heightened emotional fatigue, ultimately culminating in a diminished sense of well-being.

5. Discussion

Since the New Public Management (NPM) theory infiltrated higher education in the "1980s", the efficiency-centered managerial policy has been implemented on campuses around the world, but it has unexpectedly given rise to the "high performance-low happiness" student development paradox. The continuous decline in the happiness of college students is not a problem of individual psychological adaptation, but a product of the structural contradiction of education policy. Its managerial policy leads to the psychological alienation of students from stress perception to the disintegration of self-worth system, the behavioral alienation from implicit maladjustment to explicit social dysfunction, and the development alienation from career confusion to the collapse of life meaning. Its three-dimensional alienation points to the core contradiction of managerialism - performanceism, which is contrary to the Sustainable Development Goals.

Undergraduate students, in a formative phase of self-awareness, are highly susceptible to external influences. In pursuit of validation within the university evaluation paradigm, students from prestigious institutions engage in self-exploitative behaviors, focusing on GPA and enrolling in superficially rewarding but inconsequential courses. Genuine knowledge pursuit is secondary. University incentives, such as scholarships, based on rankings and contingent rewards, foster selfishness and erode intrinsic passion for learning. This undermines academic integrity, inflicts psychological scars, and reduces happiness levels.

When undergraduates focus on obtaining limited resources, authentic social relationships are replaced by judgmental ones, with individuals reduced to "markets" or "banks" (Deleuze, 1992). Genuine interpersonal connections are hollowed out, leading to a lack of peer support and frequent "vicious competition." This is due to the commodification of relationships under audit culture (Rose, 1996), which displaces the mediating role of peer relations and subjugates personal growth to performance metrics, creating "individual schizophrenia."

Many undergraduates who experience feelings of loneliness in real-world interactions seek validation and recognition within the virtual realm. However, the construction of success narratives on the internet and the personalized recommendations generated by algorithms have ensnared a segment of undergraduates in an "information cocoon." This phenomenon exerts an often imperceptible pressure on students, impinging upon their capacity for autonomous decision-making, disrupting their future academic trajectories, and significantly undermining their overall sense of well-being and fulfillment.

This study does not oppose accountability or discredit audits and new management paradigms aimed at enhancing university quality. However, audits, pervasive in public sectors, have inherent limitations that cannot be resolved solely by governmental interventions. In an era where managerial elites dominate discourse, cultivating skepticism toward audit culture and quality assurance is crucial. Power is most potent when obscured, and performance evaluations, a cornerstone of audit culture, can be mistakenly seen as a panacea for university challenges, overshadowing alternatives (Lin & Xue, 2020). The undergraduate performance evaluation system allocates resources and constructs a competitive landscape, aiming to foster student potential and happiness. Universities, as "ideal communities," require scrutiny by discerning individuals (Strathern, 2000).

6. Conclusion

This research provides valuable insights into the adaptation strategies of undergraduates facing college challenges and seeking well-being enhancement. Their educational experiences reveal a similar pattern. The well-being of undergraduates is shaped by a complex interplay of rigid educational frameworks, intense peer competition, and insular information ecosystems. To illustrate these relationships, Figure 1 below presents a conceptual map of the interplay between the training model, peer relationships, and information cocooning, highlighting their impact on student well-being.

First, the mismatch between the university training model and individual expectations poses significant challenges to undergraduate well-being. The demanding evaluation mechanisms and rigid curricula hinder students from developing self-efficacy and identity, leading to feelings of powerlessness and anxiety, and de-prioritizing genuine knowledge acquisition.

Table 2. Themes, categories, and their distribution among participants.

| Theme | Category | Number of participants represented by this category | Sample quotations from participants |
|--|--|---|--|
| 1. The Mismatch Between Training Models and Student Expectations: Phenomenon of Misalignment in Higher Education | 1.1 Passive avoidance with too many low-quality “water courses” | 9 | <p>“I feel that other than the homeroom teacher, no teacher cares about us, and the teacher’s way of lecturing does not appeal to me. They are not as serious as the teachers I had in junior high school.”(H) “It’s been a long time since I’ve taken a non-major class that was interesting and informative, and I observed that not many people listen carefully in ‘water courses.’”(D)</p> |
| | 1.2 The cruel dilemma under performance centrism | 11 | <p>“I hate all this ‘inward rolling’⁵ behavior, and I hate it even more after taking a Principles of Education class. But if I give up, there will be a ‘sunk cost’ that will easily consume me. And, what about my future? I’m trying to change, but it’s a struggle.”(G) “In the season of ‘comprehensive testing’ that has not yet ended, my feelings are like a roller coaster of ups and downs. In my freshman year, I had a high GPA, but I get lost on the ‘information gap.’”(G) “In the second year of college, I felt that I was gradually assimilated, I appeared to participate in quite a lot of competitions, not because of interest but because of the comprehensive test. Of course, most of the time it will be my ‘laziness’ that prevents me from starting and finishing the task.”(I)</p> |
| 2. Alone in a Crowd: The Quest for Meaningful Peer Relationships | 2.1 Lack of peer support leads to low emotional resilience in undergraduate students | 5 | <p>“Social media is like a cocoon of information, firmly trapping me in it, making me feel that I have no other choices except these three roads because what I see on the Internet are only these and their detailed methods, my thinking is also unconsciously confined to this, and there is no thought of escaping it.”(I) “Dorm room relationships were also a source of annoyance, and in fact, this problem has always existed. Everyone was on their own and didn’t talk to each other.”(G) “The ‘eerie’ environment of the dormitory made me feel like I was in prison every day when I returned to the dormitory.”(I)</p> |

⁵ It means that development can only take place within a constrained area, and with diminishing returns. For example, a farmer with a limited amount of land cannot physically expand, they can only farm more intensively and with increasingly diminishing returns, which is the "inward roll."

| Theme | Category | Number of participants represented by this category | Sample quotations from participants |
|--|---|---|---|
| | 2.2 Frustration from the “social comparison function” of peer groups, low self-esteem of individuals | 6 | <p>“I have felt more and more inferior since entering college. I envy those who show their talent on the stage to win the applause of the crowd, and I just don’t think I can compare to them. I have always been limited to comparing myself with others, and thus feel even more small.”(G) “In particular, the fact that two of my classmates passed the selection process to enter the ‘innovation class’ gave me a sense of inferiority.”(J) “All kinds of self-denial ate away at my brain... I realized that the source of the ‘peer pressure’ that had bound me for my entire life was my competitively trapped self.”(E)</p> |
| 3. The Dilemma of Information Overload: The Toll of the Information Cocoon on Student Well-being | 3.1 The constraints too many success templates in the information cocoon place on the present self | 10 | <p>“The social media’s promotion of ‘successful people’ has added immeasurable pressure. I have seen more than once that student A got the national scholarship for three consecutive years and is likely to be admitted to a 985 university without an exam; student B got full grades in dozens of courses and was successfully guaranteed graduate school.....”(G) “Even though normally I really don't care about these things, there will be a moment in the dead of a night when I suddenly reflect on whether or not I really am good enough.”(I)</p> |
| | 3.2 Homogenized information from the information cocoon interferes with undergraduate students’ planning for the future | 6 | <p>“Whenever I open my phone to seek some help about the future, I see only graduate students exempted from exams, graduate students doing exams, and work I can not escape these three roads, gradually, my thinking seems to be confined here, I cannot think of the future in addition to these three roads can I have another way out.”(K)</p> |

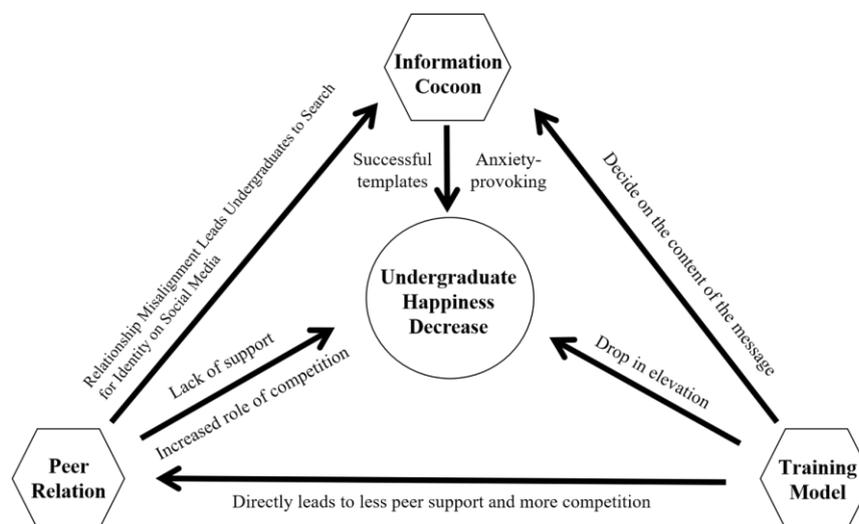


Figure 1. Undergraduate well-being and the relationship between training model, peer relationships, and information cocooning

Second, peers are a primary support source for undergraduates. The complex interplay of competition and cooperation in social and academic life causes mental distress, eroding well-being. Promoting positive, cooperative peer relationships can enhance undergraduate well-being.

The Internet, through big data and social media algorithms, creates an information cocoon that impacts students pursuing self-actualization. This cocoon exerts invisible pressure, undermining significance and impeding goal achievement. Future research should explore intrinsic motivations for self-actualization and mechanisms underlying undergraduate happiness in the context of university pedagogy, peer dynamics, and social media use.

Although this study offers insights, some shortcomings must be acknowledged. First, although we considered the representativeness of the case university and the sample, the study was limited by times background and the external environment like employment status, the difficulty of becoming a graduate student etc. And there were also differences in lifestyles, conceptual norms, and participants' personality traits. Second, this study is a qualitative study with a small sample size, meaning the findings are not generalizable. In addition, although researchers insisted on reflection and review throughout the stage of the study, we still could not avoid the subjective influence on the participants' oral materials which is the basic of research data, and further quantitative and mixed studies on Chinese undergraduate students' unhappiness need to be conducted based on the present study. Third, how undergraduate "unhappiness" develops in China has deep-rooted social reasons, which are only briefly discussed in this study, and need to be analyzed more deeply and comprehensively in future research.

Author Contribution

All authors contributed to the study conception and design. Heyuan Wang is responsible for the initial idea and project lead. The methodological approach and data analyses were conducted by Zhifang Liu, Yuxi He and Yuxi Jiang and Jiayin Shen and Siyan Wang and the theoretical concept was framed by Heyuan Wang and Zhifang Liu. Manuscript preparation was performed by all authors. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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Ethical Approval

All data collection procedures, tools, and documents have been reviewed by the data protection department of Ningbo University. Necessary steps have been taken to protect the privacy of participants in accordance with national and international data security regulations. Participation in the study is voluntary and based on the informed consent of the participants.

Data Availability Statement

The interview data supporting this study were generated during the research process but were not retained. This decision was made to protect the privacy and confidentiality of the participants, as the data contain sensitive

information. The study's findings are based on the analysis conducted during the research period, and the results are presented in this article.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Use of AI and AI-assisted Technologies

No AI tools were utilized for this paper.

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