



## Factors Affecting Mental Health Among Chinese College Students: A Preliminary Review of Literature

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### ABSTRACT

Mental health has attracted much attention over the past decades. Academic pressure, employment pressure, interpersonal relationship, emotional problems all impact students' bodies and minds. This paper aims to comb through relevant literature to identify the factors affecting mental health among college students in China. Five hundred forty-five articles were retrieved containing relevant keywords such as factors affecting mental health from the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) database. These articles were published from 1989 to the first half of 2021. A broad thematic analysis revealed that these factors could be grouped into four main categories: family, social, college-life, and individual factors. This paper has a significant contribution as it lays the foundation for further investigation into mental health issues among college students in China.

**Keywords:** mental health, social factors, family factors, college-life factors, personal factors

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Studies on mental health have grown by leaps and bounds over the past few decades, even more so during the COVID-19 pandemic. The most common challenge in understanding any phenomenon lies with the definition of its nomenclature. According to World Health Organization, "*Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of infirmity*" (The World health report, 2001, p.1), while mental health is defined as "*A state of well-being in which the individual realises his or her abilities, can cope with the everyday stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and can make a contribution to his or her community*" (The World health report, 2001, p.1). The implication of these definitions includes three overarching ideas central to improving health. They are, i) mental health is an integral part of health, ii) mental health is more than the absence of mental illness, and iii) mental health is closely interwoven between physical health and behaviour. Mental health is thus the foundation for well-being and effective functioning for an individual and a community. Mental health is defined in the Concise Britannica as the best functioning state of a person's mind within the scope of its own and external environmental conditions, but not the absolute state of perfection (Huang, 2012). As one of the essential contents of comprehensive and healthy development (Bi, He, & Yang, 2009), mental health is significant to developing a healthy personality (He, 2007). In addition, different scholars have different understandings of mental health. Yao (2004) and Ma (2004) define mental health as a continuous development of psychological conditions. The subject can make a good adaptation, have life's vitality, and live up to his total physical and mental potential. Although there is no unified concept of mental health, scholars generally agree that the scope of mental health is complicated, and the lines are blurred, further complicated by cultural, societal and individual differences. However, in a broad sense, mental health is a continuous and satisfactory psychological state; on the contrary, in a narrow sense, mental health is the unity of knowledge, emotion, intention and behaviour. It is the perfect coordination of personality and good social adaptation.

### 1.1 Mental health among college students

Research on college students' mental health has been of interest among researchers in China and abroad (Wang, 2020). The rapid development of society, continuous progress, and advancement of the internet and information and communications technology has also brought many challenges to students' mental health. Academic pressure, interpersonal relationships, emotional problems, and future employment pressure significantly impact students' bodies and minds. In China, among college students, 18.1% are facing psychological pressure, 18.8% are facing communication pressure, 13.8% are facing depression, 33.2% are facing future employment pressure, 25.6% are facing relationship pressure, and 12.3% are facing family pressure (Yang, He, & Dai, 2001). As the backbones of a nation's future, college students' mental health status directly affects the development of society and the country. According to a survey of 126,000 college students conducted by the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China (2021), 20.23% of them have psychological disorders of varying degrees. The survey also revealed that in the mid-1980s, 23.3% of college students in China had psychological disorders, rising to 25% in the 1990s, and has reached 30% in recent years. According to domestic and foreign research estimates, the proportion of college students with psychological disorders and mental disorders is as high as 20%

to 40%. College life is a critical stage in which an individual's physical and psychological mature increasingly. As college students undertake learning tasks and social responsibilities, they become more and more challenging.

However, due to the lack of maturity, they often overestimate themselves, which leads to substantial psychological pressure, resulting in psychological imbalance and even depression (Liu, 2003). Healthy psychology is the foundation for college students to learn scientific knowledge and everyday life and the fundamental guarantee of receiving ideological and political education. During this COVID-19 pandemic, Sun et al. (2021) found that college students have different degrees of anxiety. The influencing factors include grade, major, place of origin, knowledge of COVID-19, weekly frequency of going out, and sleep quality. According to the demographic characteristics and anxiety sources of different students, more social support and targeted, personalised intervention measures should be given to promote the formation of a positive psychological state. Qiao et al. (2021) found that during this pandemic, environmental factors and social support factors caused the mental health scores of college students in Shanxi Province to deviate from the national youth norm, and health management factors could improve the mental health of college students. Chen et al. (2021) believe that college students' mental health status is poor during the delayed term of COVID-19. Intervention should be focused on different stages and groups to provide them with coping programs to cope with academic stress, increase social support, and improve the psychological disorders of college students caused by delayed school opening. In order to develop a more excellent pool of talents, it is of utmost importance for more studies to be conducted that look at college students' mental health, analyse the factors that influence their mental health and explore ways to improve their mental health (Li, 2003). Therefore, this paper aims to present a preliminary review of literature findings on factors affecting mental health among college students in China.

## 2 METHODS

### 2.1 Sources of article and selection criteria

Data was gathered from China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) database on the factors affecting the mental health of college students in China. No references from other relevant databases were utilised. Using the keywords such as *mental health*, *impact factor*, *student mental health*, *mental health problems*, *college student mental health status*, *college students*, and *impact factor analysis* to comb through the database. As a result, a total of 545 publications were found. Most of the publications retrieved described factors that affect mental health among colleges in various provinces and universities in China.

Due to the various literature resources, some types only yielded a few publications. In contrast, others were numerous. The mined publications were divided into journal articles, master's theses, and doctoral theses. A further breakdown revealed 421 journal articles, master's theses (46), doctoral theses (4). These publications were divided into five categories according to the main themes they were mental health (290), analysis of influencing factors (137), the mental health status of college students (69), research on influencing factors (36), influence and countermeasures

(13), as seen in Table 1. These publications could be categorised further into nine disciplines they were psychology (217), educational theory and management (164), higher education (46), basic medicine (43), physical education (27), sociology (26), public health and preventive medicine (10), clinical medicine (8), psychiatry (4), as seen in Table 2. Conference proceedings, newspapers, books and patents (74) are not included in further analysis.

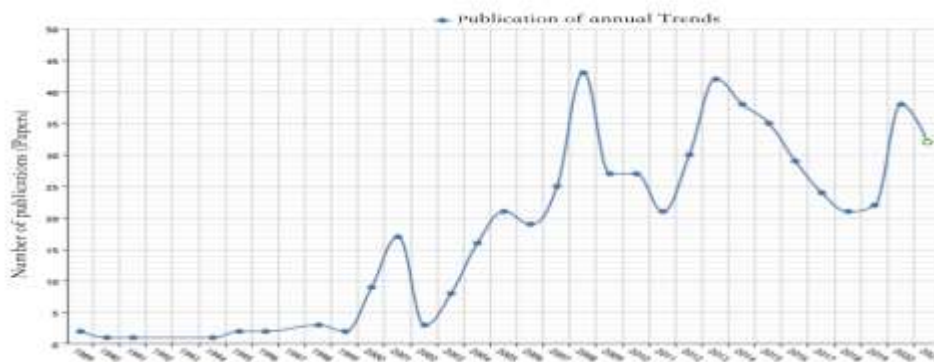
**Table 1.** Distribution of articles by theme.

Articles by theme	Quantity	Percentage (%)
Mental health	290	53
Analysis of influencing factors	137	25
Mental health status of college students	69	13
Research on influencing factors	36	7
Influence and countermeasures	13	2

**Table 2.** Distribution of articles by discipline.

Discipline	Quantity	Percentage (%)
Psychology	217	40
Educational theory and management	164	30
Higher education	46	8
Basic medicine	43	8
Physical education	27	5
Sociology	26	5
Public health and preventive medicine	10	2
Clinical medicine	8	1
Psychiatry	4	1

From 1989 to 2021, the frequency of publication was the highest in 2012-2015, with an average annual number of over 30 papers, and 15 papers were published in 2021, as depicted in Figure 1. Figure 2 shows a summary of the data selection and screening process.



**Figure 1.** Distribution of published articles from 1989 to 2021.

Identification	Publications identified through CKNI database searching for factors affecting mental health among college students (n=545)
Screening	421 journal articles, 46 master's theses, 4 doctoral theses, 74 Conference proceedings, newspapers, book, patents
Eligibility	Included for review: journal articles (n=421) Excluded from review: master's thesis, doctoral theses, conference proceedings, newspapers, books and patents (n=124)
Included	Articles contain Family factors (n = 45) Articles contain Social factors (n=23) Articles contain College-life factors (n=32) Articles contain Personal factors (n=9)

**Figure 2.** Data selection and screening process

### 3 FINDINGS

From 545 articles retrieved, a broad thematic approach was used to identify the factors influencing mental health among college students in China. These articles were published between 1989 to the first half of 2021. The following section discusses the findings based on four main categories: literature related to family factors, social factors, college-life factors, and personal factors.

#### 3.1 Family factors

After careful analysis, 49 articles were identified to have family factors contributing to mental health issues among college students in China. These articles excluded master's and doctoral theses published between 2005 to 2021. Findings from these articles have identified that some parents have too high expectations for their children. They were also too strict with their children, which has resulted in significant pressure (Lu, 2010). In addition, due to busy work schedule and limited time for communication, students' psychological problems were ignored and was not given due care and concern. Parental divorce has resulted in the absence of proper parental guidance and the lack of good roles models has led to a higher incidence of psychological problems in children than

in average families (He et al., 2001). Apart from that, family poverty was also a significant cause of mental health issues among college students. Students from low-income families bear tremendous pressure in study, life and work. To let their families down, some children work harder on their studies and bear the economic pressure brought by high tuition fees and daily living expenses and are more likely to have psychological problems such as inferiority complex and self-closure. Although economic and family pressure can motivate them to work hard, it also brings them psychological problems and troubles of varying degrees (Bo et al., 2009; Chen & Chen, 2008; Lu, 2010). Liu, Chen and He (2021) found that college students generally have some symptoms of stress, anxiety, and depression symptoms. College students whose family economic status is poor and whose family economic status is affected by COVID-19 have significant symptoms of anxiety and depression. Symptoms of stress, anxiety and depression were most severe among students with severe physical and mental illness. From the initial analyses, it could be deduced that family factors played an essential role in affecting mental health issues among college students in China.

### **3.2 Social factors**

Twenty-three publications between 1998 and 2018 were identified, including the overarching theme of social factors. One of the most important social factors identified in these publications was the pressure of future employment. According to the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China (2021), 8.74 million college graduates graduated in 2020, an increase of 400,000 from the previous year. It was expected that the employment situation of college graduates in the first half of 2021 would become more complicated and severe, taking into account the combined impact of downward economic pressure and the COVID-19 pandemic. The demand for new graduates in small and micro enterprises with fewer than 100 employees contracted by 52% year-on-year. Demand for new graduates was recovering, compared with a drop of 49% in the overall ten days after the holiday and a 60% drop in small and micro businesses, but recruitment was still significantly insufficient. In the new situation of self-employment and multiple employment channels, employees were often not satisfied facing the fierce competition in the labour market. In addition, social factors such as ethnicity, social support, and stressful events in life also contribute to mental health issues. Different ethnic groups have different customs and religious beliefs, which has a non-negligible effect on psychology to a certain extent. Ma and Xi (2007) studied the mental health problems of ethnic minority postgraduates in Gansu. They found that 100% of ethnic minority postgraduates have had negative emotional experiences related to academic pressure, environmental adaptation and economic ability. Only 60% of Han postgraduates had negative emotional experiences related to academic pressure. As a result of the negative emotion, up to 80% of ethnic minority graduate students suffer from chronic physical symptoms such as insomnia, dizziness, dreaminess and neurasthenia, some of which last for a long time and even affect their studies. Gruebner et al. (2012) noted people's mental health in the Dhaka slum. They found that mental health was significantly correlated with the environmental characteristics of the residential area, flood, environmental sanitation, housing quality and robustness. After controlling for confounding factors, there was a significant correlation between mental health and population density, job satisfaction and wage class. Xue, Lu, and Liang (2008) investigated the mental health status of college students in rural areas and found that the scores of factors such as compulsion, anxiety, depression, interpersonal sensitivity and paranoia were

generally higher than those of urban students. The proportion of people with high scores in depression, terror, interpersonal sensitivity and psychosis was the highest in rural areas, followed by villages and towns, and the lowest in large and medium-sized cities. The scores of obsessive factor and somatic factor of being the only child of college students in rural areas were also lower than those of college students with at least one sibling. With the rapid pace of life in modern society, various adverse events have emerged. Meng et al. (2011) studied the mechanism of life stressful events on adolescents' mental health and concluded that each dimension of stressful events was significantly correlated with anxiety and depression. Chen, Zhao and Liu (2009) studied the relationship between adverse life events and the mental health of college students and concluded that five dimensions of stressful events in life were interpersonal communication, learning pressure, punishment, loss and health adaptation.

### **3.3 College-life factors**

Thirty-two related publications between 1999 and 2021 were retrieved, which contained the overarching theme of college-life factors. It was found that campus violence has become one of the critical factors affecting students' mental health. It includes college violence, lecturers' ethics, academic pressure, and interpersonal relationships. Liao et al. (2018) believed that with the popularisation of education, students are more access to education in China. Most students have better access to quality higher education and stay in school for more than a decade. Thus, the management of the school is vital. The frequent occurrence of campus violence has affected the growth of some students and hurt them physically and mentally. Zhang et al. (2012) showed in the survey that the interpersonal pressure faced by students at school mainly comes from three kinds of relationships: student-teacher, student-parent and student-student. The data analysis revealed that the rate of tension with teachers stood at 53.2%, which was more significant than the other two types of tensions combined. Conflict with teachers and teachers' hostility is common among students in vocational colleges. Zhang and lv (2000) found that most college students view problems with idealism. When reality is inconsistent with ideal, conflicts tend to emerge. In China, college students usually associate their future with the country's destiny and study hard for the revitalisation of China. From high school exam-oriented learning transiting to specialised professional learning in university, the original single learning motivation coupled with the university entrance exam or *gaokao* anxiety, mental health issue has become more apparent among students in China. Upon entering university, the idea of academic freedom produces various conflicts unseen before. Apart from that, their values and worldview have not fully developed at the point of college entry. As they grow and mature with age, they are faced with the challenges presented to them while attending college. As a result, students are faced with the choice of values, psychological changes and a host of psychological problems.

### **3.4 Personal factors**

Nine publications between 2007 and 2020 were identified to have personal factors that affect mental health among college students in China. Further analysis revealed that personal factors could be categorised into three domains: emotional problems and lack of physical exercise. Emotional problems were ranked as the main contributor to personal factor that causes mental health issues. These emotions include love problems, love frustration and breakups of

relationships. Tian et al. (2005) found that male students have a significantly higher frequency than female students in the rate of love-related frustration. It may be because males are more likely to be active pursuers and invest more in their relationships and love interests. When relationships failed, they felt more frustrated compared to females. They also found that females with psychological problems are significantly higher than males. The average score of depression among female students is significantly higher than that of male students. The tendency for female students to be discriminated against or misunderstood is higher than that of male students, which is consistent with the characteristics of female students being sensitive, delicate and dependent. Regarding ethnic groups, the proportion of psychological problems among ethnic minority college students is 7.60%, and that of Han college students is 6.77% (Fan, 2006). In terms of physical exercise, college students who do not often take part in physical exercise are in weak physical condition, so they are more likely to suffer from psychological disorders, neurasthenia, and other problems (Liu et al., 1994).

#### **4 CONCLUSION**

In this review, 545 related literature were searched using factors affecting college students' mental health as the keywords. After excluding theses, conference proceedings, newspapers and patents, 421 journal articles were eligible for further analysis. In terms of publication year, they ranged from 1998 to 2021. In the final screening, only 109 journal articles were included and analysed. The main influencing factors identified could be broadly categorised into family, society, college life and personal factors. For family factors, the elements which affected college students' mental health were family atmosphere, parental relationship, economic situation. These three factors have been mentioned in almost all the publications analysed in this study. For social factors, the components that affect college students' mental health were mainly employment pressure, social identity, living environment such as extreme poverty, and stressful events in life. As for the college-life factor, campus violence, academic pressure and interpersonal were identified as major factors. Finally, for personal factors, they included emotional problems and physical factors. Through the summary and classification of relevant literature, a clearer understanding of the factors affecting the mental health of Chinese college students has been derived and thus laid a foundation for further research. This preliminary review has uncovered that these four factors contribute to the mental health issues among college students in China. For a more comprehensive review, the researchers should look into other international databases to uncover other factors that contribute to the mental health issues among college students in other contexts to build a more comprehensive literature review for further research.

Note: Most of the literature cited in the article was sourced from an exclusive database, the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) database, which can only be accessed within the Republic of China. If readers face challenges in accessing some of these references, kindly contact the corresponding author personally.



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