

Realistic pressure, individual traits and memory bias: the construction mechanism of college students' perception that "college is more tiring than Senior Three"

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Abstract. This study aims to deeply unpack the generative logic underlying college students' subjective feeling that "college is more exhausting than Senior Three". Adopting a qualitative research approach, in-depth interviews were conducted with six undergraduate students (including two general track students and four art track students), and thematic analysis was applied to sort out interview data. The findings are as follows: First, the belief that "college is more tiring than Senior Three" is not a universal consensus, but is significantly shaped by individual personality and grade stage. Second, fatigue in Senior Three mainly stems from physical exhaustion caused by intensive academic work, whereas college fatigue concentrates on mental internal friction arising from directional choices, career planning and interpersonal relationships, marking an essential qualitative distinction between the two forms of tiredness. Third, retrospective memory bias further amplifies perceptions of exhaustion during college: interviewees' memories of negative experiences in Senior Three tend to grow vague, while feelings of current college stress remain vivid and immediate. The study demonstrates that college students' sense of fatigue constitutes a composite psychological experience jointly constructed by objective realistic pressure, individual traits and cognitive memory bias amid the transition from senior high school to university, offering empirical evidence for understanding psychological burnout among contemporary college students.

Keywords: college students, academic burnout, qualitative research, memory bias, mental internal friction

1. Introduction

A sharply contrasting common phenomenon prevails on university campuses. Compared with the highly structured, fast-paced high-pressure learning model of senior high school, college students possess ample free time and autonomy, which theoretically ought to render their daily lives more relaxed. In reality, however, burnout phenomena such as poor in-class concentration, negative after-class states and low motivation to participate in activities are widespread, with numerous students developing the perception that "college is more tiring than Senior Three".

Existing research on the causes of college students' academic burnout primarily follows two strands: objective stressors and subjective cognitive bias. In terms of objective pressure, Lian Rong et al. identified

prevalent emotional exhaustion among college students through questionnaires and interviews, and noted that long-standing learning psychology research has focused predominantly on primary and secondary school students, with a lack of measurement tools tailored to college students [1]. A longitudinal study conducted by Li Yuhui tracking students from Senior Three to university revealed that college students face five categories of pressure: academics, future development, interpersonal relationships, self-evaluation and family finances; among these, pressure related to interpersonal relationships, self-evaluation and family finances is markedly higher during college than in senior high school [2]. A survey by Sun Xiaoli indicated that 37.5% of college students suffer from academic burnout, which is mainly associated with learning initiative, major interest, learning attitudes, anxiety, self-efficacy and employment pressure [3].

Regarding subjective cognition, Corenblum and Goernert found that the core of mental exhaustion lies not in rigid fixation on painful memories, but in the continuous accumulation of cognitive load stemming from difficulty clearing neutral information [4]. Glynn et al. and Stephens et al. further pointed out that autobiographical memories are far harder to actively suppress than generic memories [5, 6]. This suggests that even the agonizing experiences of Senior Three cannot be truly erased, and the sentiment that "college is more tiring than Senior Three" largely reflects genuine burdens of real life. Additionally, Müller and Stahlberg discovered that people universally exhibit overconfidence bias in retrospective judgments, tending to overestimate their past performance [7].

Overall, two gaps persist in extant research. First, most studies examine college students' fatigue solely within the university context, with few drawing comparisons between university and senior high school stages. Second, research on objective pressure and subjective cognition operates in isolation, lacking attempts to integrate the two perspectives to analyze how feelings of exhaustion are collectively constructed. Against this backdrop, this study adopts a qualitative methodology based on in-depth interviews to explore college students' authentic life experiences, comparatively analyze disparities between high school and university fatigue, and systematically dissect the generative logic of this phenomenon by combining objective realistic pressure and subjective memory bias. It thereby addresses the limitation of single research perspectives in existing literature and provides more practically grounded references for interpreting psychological burnout among contemporary college students.

2. Research methodology

This study employs qualitative research centered on in-depth interviews to fully comprehend college students' authentic narratives regarding the feeling that "college is more exhausting than Senior Three". Interviews revolved around three core topics: the sources of fatigue in college, the sources of fatigue in senior high school, and a comparison of fatigue between senior high school and college. Each interview lasted 20 to 40 minutes, with full audio recording and verbatim transcription.

Interviewees comprised six undergraduate students: two general track students and four art track students (one music student and three dance students). Art track students were selected because they had to balance cultural coursework and professional training throughout senior high school. If this group, already subjected to dual physical and mental depletion in high school, still reports exhaustion after entering university, it indicates that this phenomenon may hold broader generalizability.

Data saturation was reached after interviewing the fifth and sixth participants, as their narratives began to repeat identical themes. Thematic analysis was adopted for data processing: transcribed materials were marked and categorized to extract core threads from raw narratives, ultimately forming a comprehensive interpretation of the sentiment that "college is more tiring than Senior Three".

3. Research findings

Collation and analysis of interview transcripts from the six participants reveal that the claim "college is more tiring than Senior Three" fails to represent a universal consensus and displays pronounced individual differences. In terms of personal personality, a third-year student stated: "It might come down to my personality. Watching classmates all busy with different things—some doing internships, some preparing for postgraduate entrance exams, others starting work early—everyone seems to have clear goals, while I feel like I'm falling behind. This fills me with constant anxiety; it's not physical tiredness, but mental exhaustion". Confronted with a surplus of choices, some individuals sink into anxious internal friction, while others accept uncertainty with relative equanimity, and such personality disparities shape their perception and expression of fatigue. Lazarus and Folkman's cognitive appraisal theory states that stress itself does not directly lead to burnout; rather, the individual's appraisal of the stressor is the key mediating variable [8]. Furthermore, fatigue varies across grade levels: final-year seniors approaching graduation report far greater exhaustion than second-year students. Among the six interviewees, all five third-year students agreed that "college is more tiring than Senior Three", whereas one second-year aviation track student held the opposite view that college is more relaxed, citing enjoyable university experiences such as flexible schedules and freedom to pursue personal hobbies. A questionnaire survey conducted by Xiaoli Sun on 1,036 college students from six universities in Nanjing revealed significant differences in total burnout scores across different academic years: freshmen had the lowest level of burnout, while the differences among sophomores, juniors, and seniors were not significant [3]. Notably, two non-participant students nearby volunteered remarks mid-interview, asserting that college is definitely less taxing. Therefore, perceptions of college fatigue are closely tied to students' current grade stage and inherent personality tendencies.

Simultaneously, the study identifies essential disparities in the origins and nature of fatigue experienced by students during senior high school versus college. All six participants confirmed that high school fatigue primarily derives from academic pressure and physical strain. One art exam student recounted: "In Senior Three, I woke up before six every morning for professional training, attended daytime classes, and continued practicing late into the night, bearing an intense physical workload". A general track student explained: "Fatigue in Senior Three stemmed entirely from score-driven pressure and insufficient sleep, with a rigid, clearly structured daily routine". By contrast, academic stress was rarely cited as a source of college exhaustion; most complaints centered on overwhelming choices, career planning and interpersonal strain. Excluding two targeted teacher-training students, the remaining four participants stated that college weariness arises from an overabundance of directions, which creates constant internal friction amid indecision. A third-year music student on a targeted teacher-training program noted: "College marks the transition from student life to the workplace, bringing acute anxiety about imminent entry into professional employment". A third-year dance student commented: "University life involves far more than coursework; navigating complicated interpersonal relationships sometimes drains more energy than professional training". A third-year general track student summarized: "Senior Three tires the body, while college wears down the mind. There are countless paths to choose from, widespread information gaps, and far more complex problems to contemplate". It is evident that senior high school fatigue is dominated by physical depletion from academic demands, while college exhaustion rarely relates to academics and mostly manifests as mental internal friction triggered by career indecision, employment anxiety and workplace apprehension. This shift from "physical exhaustion" to "psychological depletion" is directly related to differences in the types of stressors. Yuhui Li's longitudinal study identified five categories of stressors: academic pressure, future development pressure, family-economic pressure, self-evaluation pressure, and interpersonal relationship pressure. The study found that academic pressure remains a major source during both high school and university, but interpersonal

relationship pressure, self-evaluation pressure, and family–economic pressure are significantly higher during the university stage [2].

Moreover, beyond objective disparities in stress, subjective memory bias constitutes an indispensable factor generating the perception that "college is more tiring than Senior Three". Distinct patterns emerged during interviews regarding participants' recall of high school fatigue: four students directly stated "I barely remember how exhausting it was", unable to retrieve specific lived states from that period. The other two exhibited vague recall when reciting their daily Senior Three schedules, only able to outline general routines rather than precise details. One participant reflected: "I only associate Senior Three's constant high pressure with the pain tied to exam scores". When describing high school fatigue, all six interviewees limited their accounts to objective factual descriptions—what time they rose, how many classes they attended daily, how late they trained—while their depictions of concurrent emotional distress remained generalized and indistinct. In stark contrast, narratives of college fatigue featured vivid, granular details infused with intense emotional language such as "anxiety", "internal friction" and "no clear path forward". When asked whether they would opt to relive Senior Three or a year of college if given the choice, only one participant chose Senior Three, with the remaining five selecting university. The widespread acknowledgment that Senior Three was objectively harder paired with universal reluctance to repeat the experience suggests that memories of Senior Three's hardships have been partially blurred and diluted, while ongoing college stress, unfiltered by the passage of time, feels disproportionately heavy. Such involuntary softening of recollected negative experiences aligns with established psychological findings: humans tend to develop memory bias when recalling past suffering, unconsciously idealizing or blurring unpleasant episodes. The hardships of Senior Three lose their sharp edges in retrospective memory, whereas the unprocessed strains of daily college life feel uniquely burdensome. Walker et al. confirmed through multiple experiments that humans' memories of negative events fade significantly faster over time than those of positive events—a phenomenon known as the "fading affect bias" [9]. Its evolutionary significance lies in helping individuals maintain an adaptive psychological state, but it also means that past painful experiences are systematically "softened". Moreover, the research by Müller and Stahlberg precisely corroborates the observations of this study—people generally overestimate their own past performance and abilities in retrospective judgments, and this overconfidence bias further leads to the hardships of senior high school being "rationalized as a necessary process" in post-hoc evaluations [7]. It is precisely this dual reshaping—the fading of negative emotions coupled with the glorification of achievements—that causes the fatigue of senior high school to be systematically underestimated in memory, while the unfiltered pressure of college is vividly perceived as "more exhausting".

4. Conclusion

Based on the foregoing analysis of interview data, this study draws the following conclusions:

First, perceptions of college fatigue lack universal consensus and are heavily shaped by individual differences. College students' experience of "tiredness" diverges sharply along lines of personal personality and grade stage. When confronted with abundant life choices, sensitive personalities are prone to anxious internal friction, while more placid individuals tolerate uncertainty with greater ease. Additionally, fatigue displays clear grade stratification: third-year and graduating students navigating postgraduate and employment choices report substantially higher exhaustion than second-year students. Accordingly, the sentiment that "college is more tiring than Senior Three" represents merely a subjective perception held by certain students at specific life stages, rather than a universal phenomenon. This finding aligns with the quantitative results of Xiaoli Sun, which also revealed significant differences in total burnout scores across different grades [3]. The

contribution of this study lies in further revealing that the high level of fatigue among junior-year students mainly stems from the psychological depletion caused by decisions regarding further education and employment, rather than from academic work itself.

Second, fatigue in Senior Three and fatigue in college differ fundamentally in nature and origin. Senior high school exhaustion consists mainly of objective, uniform physical weariness stemming from intensive academic labor, characterized by unambiguous learning objectives and fixed developmental pathways. College fatigue, by contrast, manifests predominantly as multifaceted mental internal friction, rooted in confusion over life trajectories, anxiety about career planning and pressures of interpersonal management. This shift constitutes the growing pains of students transitioning from passive exam-oriented learning to independent self-determination. The above findings are largely consistent with Yuhui Li's longitudinal observations—interpersonal stress and self-evaluation stress during the university period were significantly higher than those during high school [2]. However, a notable difference is that Yuhui Li found academic stress remained one of the main sources of pressure in university, whereas very few respondents in this study mentioned academic stress. This discrepancy may be related to the relatively high proportion of art students in this sample (4 out of 6), whose assessment methods differ from those of regular academic-track students [2].

Third, memory bias filtered by the passage of time amplifies present-day feelings that college life is more taxing. Participants' recollections of Senior Three's suffering are vague, with specific negative emotional experiences attenuated; accounts of college fatigue, by contrast, remain vivid and concrete. This involuntary idealization of past adversity softens the perceived severity of Senior Three's hardships in memory, while unreflected-upon college struggles feel uniquely weighty. Even though most participants rationally recognize that senior high school was objectively more arduous, their emotional disinclination to repeat that period fully illustrates how cognitive memory shapes subjective lived perceptions. This study validates the experimental conclusions of Walker et al. in natural settings: the emotional intensity of negative events fades faster over time than that of positive events (i.e., the fading affect bias) [9], while also echoing Müller and Stahlberg's findings on retrospective overconfidence bias, thereby extending this mechanism from the laboratory to the domain of real-life experiences [7].

In summary, college "tiredness" is essentially a psychological experience collectively forged by individual personality, grade stage and cognitive memory bias as students navigate a transitional phase marked by complexity and uncertainty. Its core driver is not physical exertion, but accumulated cognitive and emotional strain inherent to personal growth.

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