

SOCIAL FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO FRUSTRATION AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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Abstract: University students often experience high levels of frustration when social pressures impede their academic and personal goals. This article reviews how key social factors – including intense academic pressure, peer competition, family expectations, financial stress, and social comparison (especially via social media) – contribute to student frustration. Drawing on recent theoretical and empirical studies, we show that these pressures create obstacles to goal achievement and violate students' psychological needs, leading to feelings of frustration, anxiety, and demotivation. For example, excessive academic workload and fear of failure undermine students' sense of competence. Fierce peer competition fosters a performance-oriented culture, weakening motivation and elevating stress. Similarly, overly high parental expectations can inflate students' stress levels by increasing control and fear of letting the family down. Financial difficulties impede academic success and isolate students socially, further fueling frustration. Moreover, constant social comparison – especially upward comparisons on social media – makes students feel inferior and career-frustrated when peers' successes seem to outpace their own. Together, these social stressors thwart students' basic needs (competence, relatedness) and exacerbate negative emotions, suggesting that universities should address them to support student well-being.

Key words: University students; frustration; academic pressure; peer competition; family expectations; financial stress; social comparison; mental health.

Introduction

Frustration is an emotional response to obstacles or unmet goals that a person believes they should be able to attain. Among university students, frustration commonly arises when external pressures block academic success or social fulfillment. In the highly competitive context of higher education, students encounter pressures from studies, peers, family, and society. If these pressures exceed students' coping resources, the result is chronic stress and frustration, which can harm motivation and mental health. For example, Lazarus's cognitive appraisal theory suggests that stress and frustration depend on how students perceive demands vs. their coping ability. When demands (e.g., heavy coursework or parental pressure) are appraised as overwhelming, negative emotions ensue. Social-psychological theories also highlight the role of social context: Festinger's social comparison theory posits that evaluating oneself against others can undermine self-esteem when comparisons are unfavorable. In this review, we analyze how key social factors – academic pressure, peer competition, family expectations, financial stress, and social comparison – contribute to frustration. We focus on theoretical literature and recent findings, illustrating how each factor creates barriers to student goals. Understanding these factors can help educators and psychologists develop strategies to reduce student frustration and promote well-being.

Academic Pressure

University curricula often impose heavy workloads, tight deadlines, and high-performance standards. This **academic pressure** is widely recognized as a major source of student stress. In empirical studies, increased academic stress correlates with poorer mental health and learning outcomes. For instance, a 2022 study confirmed that "academic stress leads to depression among students, negatively affecting

their academic performance”. Similarly, systematic reviews have identified intense coursework and fear of poor grades as risk factors for student anxiety and depression. Higher workload and uncertainty about career prospects further amplify this pressure. In theoretical terms, chronic academic pressure undermines students’ **competence** (feeling effective), one of the basic psychological needs in self-determination theory. When students consistently doubt their ability to meet academic demands, they feel incompetent and frustrated. The result can be decreased motivation, procrastination, and academic burnout. In sum, the relentless demands of university courses create a context where students frequently encounter obstacles to their academic goals, leading to frustration and distress.

Peer Competition

Another social factor is **peer competition** – the rivalry among students for grades, recognition, or scarce opportunities. A competitive academic climate can drive students to measure their worth against others, often fostering stress and frustration. Qualitative and survey research shows that when students perceive high competition in their classes, they tend to adopt an extrinsic, performance-focused mindset at the expense of intrinsic motivation. For example, Posselt and Lipson (2016) found that “perceived competition among students in classes” is an external risk factor associated with higher rates of anxiety and depression. In their large multi-campus survey, students who reported intense competition also showed elevated depressive and anxious symptoms (especially marginalized students), indicating that a cutthroat environment can harm mental health. The competition-induced mindset leads to “weakened motivation, increased procrastination, and a higher incidence of academic dishonesty”. Put simply, constant competition causes frustration by spotlighting others’ success (social comparison) and making individual failure feel more personal. When every grade or achievement feels like a zero-sum game, students become frustrated by the sense that personal effort may not guarantee success. Thus, peer competition not only stresses students externally but also undermines a supportive learning climate, which could otherwise buffer frustration.

Family Expectations

Family expectations are another potent social stressor. Many students face pressure to meet parental or cultural standards for academic success. Research indicates that **excessively high parental expectations** inflate students’ stress and contribute to frustration. For example, Guo et al. (2023) note that prior studies found academic stress is “inflated by excessively high levels of parental expectations”. When parents become highly involved and controlling in their child’s studies, students often feel they must devote extra time to studying (leading to overwork) and live up to lofty expectations. This heightened involvement reduces students’ sense of autonomy and increases fear of disappointing the family, both of which undermine motivation and well-being. Indeed, the same work reports that high parental expectations tend to be associated with more stress and anxiety in students. While moderate family support can be beneficial, unrealistic family demands can act as chronic stressors. In our framework, parental pressure restricts students’ autonomy and competence satisfaction, heightening feelings of constraint and frustration whenever students struggle to meet family-set goals. In sum, **family expectations** serve as a social factor that can push students beyond healthy limits; when students feel they must constantly satisfy family hopes, they may experience persistent frustration at the perceived gap between those demands and their own performance.

Financial Stress

Financial pressures are a key social factor affecting students. Many university students juggle tuition costs, living expenses, and sometimes part-time jobs. **Financial stress** creates frustration in two main ways. First, it can directly impede academic success: worrying about money drains cognitive resources and reduces academic focus. Second, it limits social participation, leading to feelings of isolation. For example, a qualitative study at a large U.S. university found that students under financial strain “impede their ability to succeed academically,” and also struggle with relationships “with wealthier peers,” often feeling isolated and embarrassed. This insight suggests that financial stress not only burdens study time, but also undermines a student’s sense of social belonging. In a large systematic review, insufficient financial support was explicitly linked to elevated student stress and anxiety.

Similarly, quantitative surveys report that financial constraints are associated with higher stress and risk of dropout. In psychological terms, financial hardship frustrates students' need for relatedness (connection with others) and competence (mastery of academic tasks). When worrying about money becomes chronic, students' frustration grows – they feel trapped by circumstances beyond their control, unable to fully engage in study or social life. Clearly, **financial stress** is a significant social contributor to student frustration, as it erects persistent barriers in both academic and social domains.

Social Comparison and social media

Modern social life intensifies **social comparison**, especially through social media. University students often gauge their progress and worth by comparing themselves to peers online or in person. Upward social comparisons – seeing others as doing better – tend to have particularly harmful effects. Social comparison theory explains that individuals evaluate their abilities or opinions relative to others. On social media, this tendency is magnified: people curate idealized posts about achievements, travel, or career success, leading observers to feel inadequate. For instance, Fukubayashi and Fuji (2021) show that viewing others' positive career-related posts can evoke career frustration via upward comparison. Their study found that daily social media browsing led to frequent upward comparisons and increased frustration about one's own career (a parallel to academic/career anxiety for students). More broadly, meta-analyses report that social-media-induced comparison is strongly linked to negative outcomes: upward comparison reliably produces lower self-esteem and greater depression or anxiety. In the student context, constantly seeing peers succeed (good grades, internships, social life) can make students feel they are falling behind, breeding frustration and demoralization. The visual nature of platforms like Instagram encourages contrastive comparisons – people only post highlights – so students perceive “others as having better lives”. This perceived disparity, even if illusory, can engender chronic frustration: students may feel stuck, thinking “I should be doing as well as they are.” Without interventions (e.g. fostering social savoring or in-person support) these online comparisons can compound traditional pressures and deepen frustration.

Social Support, Identity, and Isolation

Beyond competition and comparison, **social support** (or the lack thereof) is crucial. Students need a sense of belonging and understanding; when this is absent, frustration grows. Indeed, many studies identify social isolation as a risk factor for student distress. In one review, lack of social support was listed alongside fear of poor grades and academic pressure as predictors of student anxiety and depression. Similarly, insufficient social interaction and loneliness have been tied to higher student stress. Students from minority or marginalized backgrounds often face additional social barriers. Posselt and Lipson (2016) highlight that racism and lack of support disproportionately affect underrepresented students: they note that students identifying with marginalized groups are “less likely to report sufficient social support and more likely to screen positive for mental illnesses”. These students may experience role strain from navigating multiple pressures (academic and identity-based), which exacerbates frustration. For example, discrimination on campus can weaken motivation and increase anxiety. Thus, **social identity factors** – including feeling like an outsider or facing stigma – add to frustration by denying students the relatedness and affirmation they need. In contrast, strong peer networks and faculty support can buffer stress; their absence means students have fewer outlets for sharing challenges. Overall, the lack of supportive social connections (whether from friends, institutions, or family) contributes to an environment where obstacles feel isolating and frustrating.

Conclusion

University students face a complex web of social pressures that can thwart their goals and trigger frustration. Intense academic demands, competitive peers, and high family expectations each set the bar very high, so that obstacles are perceived as personal failures. Financial hardship and social media comparisons further widen the gap between a student's current state and their aspirations, deepening discontent. The reviewed literature suggests that frustration arises when these social factors collectively undermine students' basic psychological needs for competence and connection. In practice, this means that even capable students can become demotivated and anxious when they feel

constantly judged or unsupported. To mitigate frustration, educators and counselors should work to create a more supportive social climate: for example, by encouraging collaboration over cutthroat competition, setting realistic academic expectations, offering financial counseling, and teaching students to critically evaluate social media. Future research can continue to unpack how these social factors interact and how interventions (such as peer mentoring or parental guidance programs) might reduce frustration. By addressing the social roots of student stress, universities can help students achieve their academic goals with less demoralization and greater well-being.

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