

Review

Do Top Students “Lying Flat” After Admitting to “Double First-Class” Universities? A Multi-Theoretical Analysis of the Psychological Causes and Intervention Paths of “Lying Flat” Among Elite University Students

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Abstract: Students admitted to “Double First-Class” universities are regarded by society as the elite of China’s higher education system. However, a peculiar phenomenon has widely emerged: many students who were admitted with high scores begin to “Lying Flat” in university. Specifically, they show absenteeism, homework procrastination, course failures, and even serious problems such as delayed graduation or expulsion, which forms a sharp contrast with their image as top students before entering university. This paper conducts a conceptual theoretical study, analyzing the reasons behind this “lying flat” phenomenon through frameworks such as the learned helplessness theory, Weiner’s attribution theory, self-discrepancy theory, compensatory enjoyment psychology, competitive process stress theory, and social comparison stress theory. Guided by social learning theory, self-determination theory, compensatory control theory, and unconditional positive regard theory, and achievement goal theory, this study designs intervention pathways, employs literature review and theoretical analysis methods to systematically examine the multiple psychological causes and underlying mechanisms behind the “lying flat” phenomenon among students at “Double First-Class” universities, and puts forward targeted and implementable psychological intervention paths. The aim is to fill the current gap in theoretical analysis regarding this phenomenon among students at “Double First-Class” universities, providing practical references for university administrators, counselors, students, and parents, thereby supporting the psychological well-being and academic growth of these students.

Keywords: College Students, Lying Flat, Psychological Causes, Multi-theoretical Perspective

1. Introduction

In contemporary China, higher education has transitioned from an elite system to a mass-oriented one, artificial intelligence is becoming increasingly prevalent, and social competition is intensifying. Although the value of university degrees has declined to some extent, under the influence of China’s traditional belief that “education can change one’s destiny,” “Double First-Class”¹ universities remain the primary goal for many students pursuing further studies. Students who manage to navigate the challenges of the National College Entrance Examination and gain admission to prestigious universities are typically top performers in high school—those with outstanding academic records and exceptional learning abilities—representing the “top-tier students” within the basic education system. Nevertheless, a prominent and puzzling lying flat phenomenon has emerged among students from renowned universities in recent years. After enrollment, many gradually lose academic drive and ambition, exhibiting low achievement motivation. They voluntarily cease striving to boost academic grades and professional competence, and display typical lying flat behaviors such as skipping classes, procrastinating on assignments and slacking off in examinations. Such behaviors further lead to failing grades, academic warnings, delayed graduation and other academic setbacks. Some students even face the risk of being dismissed from school due to prolonged disengagement, creating a stark contrast between their underwhelming university performance and

¹ Universities in China designated as national key projects for building “World-Class Universities” and “First-Class Disciplines”

their image as top-performing students during the college entrance examination period. For instance, the Douban group titled 985² Underachievers Recruitment Program gathers hundreds of thousands of students from prestigious institutions. Regarded as outstanding learners by others, these individuals self-deprecatingly refer to themselves as failures. They share daily updates and vent frustrations through posts and comments within the group to release emotions and seek a sense of belonging and support. They share similar life trajectories: having long borne the label of excellent students, they once excelled academically and enjoyed the prestige of attending top universities, often being hailed as exemplary children growing up. Yet after entering prestigious colleges, they fall into emotional slumps, label themselves unaccomplished and opt to adopt a passive lying flat mindset.

According to an August 2025 report by *China Science Daily*, a joint survey covering over 4,000 samples across nine universities including Peking University, universities in Jiangxi and Liaoning indicated that 32.7% of college students are in an academically disengaged state, meeting at least two criteria including academic burnout, procrastination, insufficient motivation and low learning engagement. The 2023 China College Student Learning Status Survey revealed that 62% of high-achieving freshmen from prestigious universities experience motivational vacuum, marked by high risks of failing courses and relaxed learning attitudes. These students only spend 8.3 hours on independent after-class study weekly, a figure far lower than their in-class learning hours.

Taking South China University of Technology as an example, the undergraduate academic warning list for the second semester of the 2024–2025 academic year released by the university's academic affairs office included 737 students. A total of 134 students received academic warnings along with a first academic probation demotion, while 81 students faced academic warnings alongside a second probation demotion. Many parents feel perplexed: after twelve years of diligent studying that earned their children admission to top universities, why do they suddenly lose motivation and choose to lie flat, squandering their promising prospects? The phenomenon of “lying flat” among students from prestigious universities not only hinders their personal growth and development but also leads to the waste of high-quality higher education resources, poses new challenges for university educational management, and has garnered widespread attention and prompted extensive reflection within both the education and psychology communities. While existing research on college students' lying flat phenomenon has yielded certain findings, psychological studies specifically targeting elite university students remain markedly inadequate. Relevant existing researches adopt in-depth interviews to select research subjects and conduct case studies, lacking in-depth theoretical analysis (Xiao, 2023). Most other studies merely offer superficial descriptions and generalized group analysis of this phenomenon, predominantly adopting the perspective of learned helplessness with relatively singular theoretical frameworks. Furthermore, the proposed intervention strategies lack targeted value and practical operability. Few strategies are formulated in accordance with group characteristics of elite university students such as intense competitive pressure, drastic identity gap and unique psychological needs. Additionally, scientific intervention approaches rarely integrate psychological theories including self-determination theory and compensatory control theory, making it difficult to effectively address the issue of academic disengagement among students from prestigious universities. In view of the above circumstances, this paper adopts literature research and theoretical analysis methods, and applies multiple psychological theories to systematically dissect the lying flat phenomenon among students from Double First-Class universities, before putting forward targeted and practicable psychological intervention strategies. It is hoped that the research findings can serve as practical reference for college students, parents and educators, and facilitate sound mental health development and academic progress of university students.

2. Literature Selection Method

2.1. Literature Search Methods and Search Scope

This paper focuses on the psychological causes and intervention approaches for “lying flat” behavior among undergraduates at domestic “Double First-Class” universities as its core research theme. The Chinese literature review was conducted using databases such as China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI), with data sourced from the Peking University China Family Panel Study (CFPS), official documents from China's Ministry of Education, and *Guangming Daily*; the English literature search was performed using the SCIE/SSCI-Web of Science (WoS) database. Since the term “lying flat” has adopted non-original meanings since 2018, the literature search period was primarily restricted to 2018–2026—the period when domestic academic circles have conducted concentrated research on academic burnout and “lying flat” behavior among college students. For classic psychological

² 985 universities refer to institutions enrolled in the 985 Project, an educational initiative launched by the Chinese government to build world-class universities and high-level research-oriented universities. These universities boast strong faculty teams, advanced teaching facilities, and robust research capabilities, hold a pivotal position in national scientific research, and enjoy exceptional recognition and promising employment prospects in society.

theories such as the three-dimensional attribution theory, learned helplessness, and achievement goal theory, no temporal constraints were imposed; their original publications were traced back to their source materials.

The Chinese search keywords include “Double First-Class university students,” “lying flat,” “learned helplessness,” “GPA anxiety,” and “conditional active engagement”; the English search terms include “learned helplessness,” “self-directed learning,” and “academic disengagement”; cross-searching across these multiple sets of keywords was conducted to comprehensively collect relevant research materials.

2.2. Hierarchical screening criteria for literature

After completing the literature search, a three-tier screening process was applied to the vast corpus of literature. The first-stage preliminary screening: excluded non-official news reports, popular science articles, and duplicate entries; only formal journal articles, doctoral dissertations, national-level reports, and other academic materials were retained. The second-stage secondary screening: examined whether the articles met the matching criteria: First, the study subjects should focus on students from full-time undergraduate programs at “Double First-Class” universities; since there are relatively few psychological studies targeting this specific group of university students, literature focusing on university students was temporarily retained; simultaneously, considering the transition between high school and university education, articles featuring high school students were also retained, while irrelevant samples such as primary/secondary school students or non-student participants were excluded; Second, the research content must align closely with two core research domains: the psychological triggers of “lying flat” behavior, its internal mechanisms, and psychological intervention schemes; Third, for Chinese-language literature, priority was given to publications from the *Chinese Social Sciences Citation Index(CSSCI)*, *Peking University Core List(PKU Core)*, and official psychology journals; authoritative official reports and news coverage were retained; for English-language literature, only articles indexed in *Social Sciences Citation Index(SSCI)* journals were included to ensure academic quality; The third-stage final screening prioritized the adoption of quantitative empirical studies, while a small number of high-quality qualitative/reflective studies were used for analyzing current social conditions.

2.3. Literature Classification and Usage Instructions

After a multi-stage screening process, this study ultimately included a total of 36 valid Chinese and English literature sources (classic psychological theories were excluded from the calculation); these sources were categorized into three types based on their research function: the first type consists of current-state survey literature, which aims to depict the actual characteristics of long-term GPA competition among “Double First-Class” students, academic over-competition within academic circles, and “lying flat” behavior, thereby providing background support for this study; the second type comprises empirical literature on psychological causation, which provides empirical data support; the third type consists of intervention-related research literature, upon which targeted intervention pathways tailored for university students from prestigious institutions are proposed. Each category of literature is assigned to specific sections of this paper; the complete list of references is provided in the reference list at the end of this article, while a summary of the distribution of each type of literature is presented in Table 1. Additionally, 11 classic psychological theories were cited as the theoretical foundation for this paper’s analysis.

Table 1. Reference Citation and Usage.

Document Classification	Functional Uses	Number of Corresponding Literature Entries	Author of Representative Literature
Literature Review on Current Realities	This paper elaborates on the characteristics of the “lying flat” student group within the “Double First-Class” initiative and the evaluation system in China.	6 articles	Peng & Yu (2023), Xiao (2023), Lin & Gao (2021)
Literature Review on the Internal Psychological Causes of “Liangping” (Passive Non-Action)	An analysis of the underlying mechanisms of pressure, compensatory behavior, and family upbringing	20 articles	Wang et al. (2024), Raufelder & Kulakow (2021), Liu et al. (2024), Elliot & Hulleman (2017).
Classic Foundations of Psychology	Establish an analytical framework for the entire paper	11 items	Martin E.P. Seligman , Bernard Weiner , Bandura
Literature on Psychological Intervention and Management in Higher Education Institutions	Propose feasible intervention strategies	10 articles	Yao & Guo (2018), Zhu (2025), Schweder et al. (2026), Tsang & Lam (2023)

3. Lying Flat

3.1. Definition of Lying Flat

The term “lying flat” originally refers to the state of lying prone or resting. With the development of the internet, it had deviated from its original meaning as early as 2018. The phrase “lying flat and accepting criticism” emerged, describing an attitude of refraining from response and resistance while letting things take their course (Xiao, 2023). In 2021, the post Lying Flat Is Justice garnered massive attention on Baidu Tieba.³ The author stated that they chose to lie flat to break free from work restraints, pursue a free lifestyle, and maintain a low-consumption and slow-paced way of living. Thereafter, the term gained immense popularity, giving rise to concepts such as “lying flat studies” and “lying flat doctrine”, and it soon went viral across online platforms. In the same year, “lying flat” was listed among the Top 10 Buzzwords of the Year by both *Yao Wen Jiao Zi*⁴ and Language and Character Weekly. Evolving beyond being merely an internet catchphrase, it gradually became part of daily verbal expression and drew academic attention within psychological research.

3.2. Prevalence of Lying Flat Among College Students

According to the 2024 Report on College Students’ Employment Pressure in China released by the National Center for Student Information Consultation and Career Guidance under the Ministry of Education, over 62.3% of surveyed college students admitted to having exhibited lying flat behaviors featured by insufficient academic motivation and deliberate lowering of personal expectations. Among them, 28.7% showed such behaviors chronically, primarily under pressures stemming from academic competition, further education and job hunting. It has become a prevalent issue concerning college students’ mental health and academic administration. In a survey covering 2186 undergraduate students nationwide, 58.9% confessed to engaging in lying flat conduct including skipping classes, procrastinating on assignments and opting out of academic competitions. The detection rate of such behaviors among students from Double First-Class universities stood at 49.2%, slightly lower than that of ordinary universities. Nevertheless, the proportion of students with severe lying flat conditions involving course failure, delayed graduation and school dismissal risks reached 11.5%, markedly higher than the 5.3% recorded in regular universities (Peng & Yu, 2023). It is evident that lying flat is a commonplace phenomenon among college students, and severe lying flat tendencies are more prominent among students attending Double First-Class universities.

3.3. Neutral Attributes of Lying Flat

Since the emergence of this phenomenon, public and academic opinions towards lying flat have been divided. A number of scholars hold negative views on the concept. Xiong (2022) defined lying flat as a mentally passive escapist state and behavioral pattern. Zhang and Yuan (2023) argued that this phenomenon hinders college students’ personal growth and career development. He (2021) believed young people resort to lying flat out of reluctance to leave comfort zones, alongside herd mentality and dwindling ambition. Zhang (2022) noted that lying flat mostly manifests as passive and negative mindsets and conduct.

Conversely, other scholars recognize its positive implications. Shen (2022) regarded lying flat as a means for young generations to resist excessive involution. Ling and Li (2022) proposed that lying flat does not exclusively yield adverse outcomes, and the concept itself carries positive value for individuals. Wang (2021) stated that lying flat symbolizes the ideal life people yearn for, serving as an essential component of a well-functioning society.

In essence, lying flat cannot be simply classified as good or bad, and its impact hinges on its severity. Excessive lying flat will make young people lack drive and stall personal progress, while moderate disengagement helps youngsters relieve mental stress and recharge for future endeavors.

4. Psychological Causes of Lying Flat

Existing research often discusses the impact of environmental factors or a single psychological variable on academic performance. In order to fully sort out its generation path, this study constructs a multi-stage chain theory framework. As shown in Figure 1., academic competition pressure and family upbringing pressure, as antecedent variables, are mediated through multiple internal psychological mechanisms under the support of corresponding theories, ultimately affecting college students’ academic lying down

³ Baidu Tieba is an open Chinese user-generated content (UGC) community. Users are allowed to post, interact and conduct social activities around themed subforums. It stands as the largest and longest-standing comprehensive native online community platform in China.

⁴ Yao Wen Jiao Zi is a Chinese monthly journal committed to standardizing Chinese language application and popularizing Chinese linguistic knowledge. Every year, its editorial team identifies widely prevalent online and social buzzwords and releases the list of the Top Ten Catchphrases.

behavior, thus explaining the formation process of academic lying down as a whole. The following text will provide a detailed introduction to the role of internal psychological mechanisms.

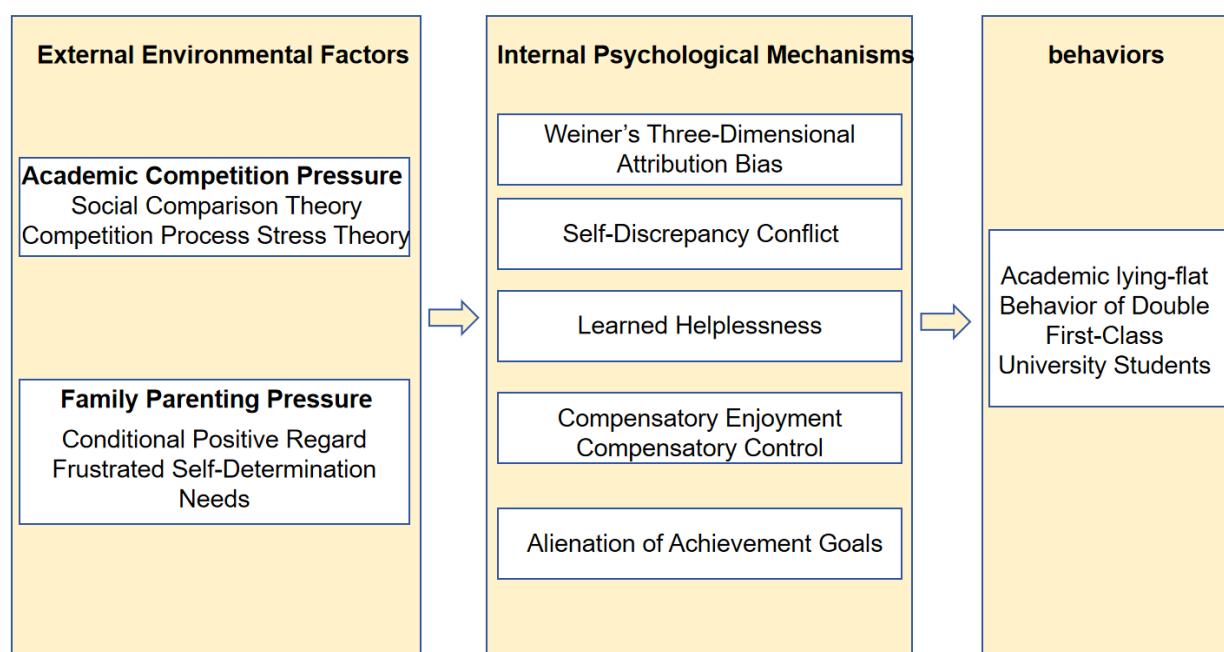


Figure 1. Theoretical Mechanism Framework of Lying Flat.

4.1. Learned Helplessness

Among contemporary college students, learned helplessness (Martin E.P. Seligman) primarily manifests as a negative psychological state where students, after prolonged efforts in their studies, feel helpless due to their inability to change their current circumstances, leading to a passive attitude. According to official data from China's Ministry of Education, over the past five years, the average annual number of applicants to China's National College Entrance Examination has been 12.478 million, with only 572,700 students admitted to "Double First-Class" universities, resulting in an average admission rate of merely 4.6%. Students admitted to prestigious universities were all top-performing learners during high school. Upon entering elite institutions, they compete with outstanding peers from across the country, which greatly intensifies the intensity and difficulty of academic competition. They frequently suffer academic setbacks, fall behind in grades and fail to attain anticipated major rankings, losing the competitive edge they once held in high school. As they fail to reverse such circumstances swiftly through personal efforts, they will gradually develop the negative perception that hard work bears no fruit, before ultimately giving up academic improvement and slipping into a state of lying flat. Furthermore, the high-intensity competition within "Double First-Class" universities and the stringent expectations imposed by teachers and society may weaken students' sense of autonomy and self-efficacy, thereby exacerbating their feelings of helplessness (Raufelder et al., 2017). Research has found that the degree of effort-reward imbalance significantly negatively predicts students' level of learning engagement. In this context, learned helplessness plays a mediating role between the effort-reward imbalance and learning engagement (Liu et al., 2024). According to the survey conducted by Peng and Yu, confronted with pressures related to livelihood, employment and personal development, 88.98% of students reported feeling that they had exerted tremendous effort yet still failed to accomplish their goals. Despite their efforts, these students did not receive the expected rewards; instead, due to repeated failures, they developed learned helplessness, which reduced their learning engagement and led them to opt for a 'lying flat' approach.

4.2. Reduced Self-Efficacy Caused by Negative Attribution

The Achievement Attribution Theory (Bernard Weiner) posits that individuals attribute the outcomes of their actions (success or failure) along three dimensions: internal versus external causes, stability, and controllability. Diverse attribution modes directly affect people's emotional experience, expectation of future results and subsequent behavioral motivation, and further determine their enthusiasm and persistence in follow-up activities. Self-efficacy refers to an individual's subjective judgment and belief regarding their ability to perform a specific behavior (Albert Bandura). It defines self-efficacy as individuals' subjective judgment and belief in their own capacity to accomplish specific behaviors. It directly influences people's task selection, work effort, perseverance and mindset when confronted with difficulties.

If individuals repeatedly attribute failures to inadequate personal ability, an internal, stable and uncontrollable factor, their initiative will be undermined, accompanied by declining self-efficacy and growing self-doubt, which makes them more susceptible to developing learned helplessness.

Cross-cultural research indicates that attribution preferences exhibit cross-cultural differences: Westerners tend to display self-serving attribution preferences, whereas Easterners are more likely to demonstrate the opposite, humble attribution preference (Kitayama et al., 1995). Influenced by China's traditional culture of modesty, Chinese families often attribute success to luck rather than ability, aiming to prevent their children from becoming arrogant; when facing their children's failures, they frequently provide feedback with a strong personal orientation, such as "You may not be suited for academic pursuits" (Zhou et al., 2025). When confronted with failure, these parents deny their children's abilities and make internal, stable attributions. Chinese college students are deeply influenced by this attribution pattern; thus, when they encounter setbacks after being admitted to prestigious universities, they often attribute the cause to their own limited abilities or insufficient effort, rather than external, uncontrollable, or unstable factors such as luck or the difficulty of the exam questions. In highly competitive elite universities, when students persist in their efforts yet still achieve poor results, this negative attribution style can lead to a decline in their self-efficacy, causing them to lose faith in their ability to successfully complete tasks. Over time, this can easily trigger learned helplessness, leading them to abandon further efforts and opt for a "lying flat" approach.

4.3. Irreconcilable Self-Discrepancy

The Self-Discrepancy Theory (Higgins) posits that an individual's self-concept comprises three interrelated components: the ideal self, the ought self, and the actual self. The ideal self and ought self both represent the identities individuals aspire to attain, collectively termed self-guides, which encompass personal aspirations, wishes, duties and obligations (Wang et al., 2024). A sound mental state features consistency and coordination among the ideal self, ought self and actual self with no prominent gaps. When individuals perceive their actual self falls far below their ideal self or ought self, self-discrepancy emerges. This gives rise to psychological conflicts, triggering negative emotions such as anxiety and self-doubt, and may even lead to depressive symptoms. This theory effectively illustrates the mental state of elite university students who adopt a lying flat attitude. Prior to the college entrance examination, these students gained admission to prestigious universities with outstanding scores and were held to high external expectations due to their student status at top-tier institutions. Having consistently ranked among top performers in high school and been regarded as exemplary students, they formed elevated perceptions of their ideal self and ought self. They anticipated maintaining outstanding academic standing and fulfilling lofty goals in academic performance and personal competence after entering university. Nevertheless, they soon encounter fierce competition from talented peers nationwide alongside rigorous and demanding coursework. They come to realize their actual self is vastly inferior to their envisioned ideal self and ought self. This stark psychological gap creates substantial self-discrepancy, bringing about intense mental strife, anxiety and self-questioning. They struggle to accept the drastic disconnect between their real status and self-expectations, and fail to bridge this gap in a short period, which breeds strong frustration and anxiousness. To alleviate the mental distress brought by self-discrepancy, they may resort to lying flat as an escape mechanism. By abandoning academic pursuits and shunning competition, they console themselves with the notion that unsatisfactory grades stem from lack of effort rather than insufficient ability. This mindset lessens their awareness of self-discrepancy and temporarily eases inner conflicts and negative sentiments.

4.4. Compensatory Gratification

Compensatory gratification serves as a psychological adjustment mechanism that individuals adopt under stress and setbacks. Its core connotation lies in that when people endure prolonged pressure, frequent failures or unmet psychological needs, they seek low-cost and instant pleasure such as scrolling through mobile phones, playing online games, going through daily routines perfunctorily and indulging in short videos to offset psychological gaps and relieve negative emotions. In today's rapidly developing and fiercely competitive internet era, confronted with practical challenges like employment difficulties and declining academic value, people are compelled to engage in intense competition from an early age to gain an advantage in the fierce social competition. Generation Z is widely recognized as a group living under intense competitive pressure. according to data from the 2022 China Family Panel Study, the total weekly study hours of high school students in China have reached an exaggerated figure of 59.7 hours. At county-level key high schools, study hours are particularly high—with early morning classes starting at 6 AM and evening classes ending at 9 PM being commonplace—far exceeding the daily study duration of eight hours explicitly stipulated by the National Health Commission. Moreover, since the introduction of the "Double Reduction" policy, many parents have publicly expressed opposition on online government consultation platforms, arguing that high school students face tight schedules and heavy workloads, and that weekends should not disrupt their study rhythm or undermine their learning effectiveness. Extracurricular tutoring has persisted despite repeated bans. To stand out amidst the wave of the college entrance examination, they are forced to curtail their leisure time and devote more time and energy to their studies. Under prolonged excessive academic pressure, their self-

relaxation time is significantly reduced, leaving them with a strong desire for ease and freedom. University marks the first time most young people live independently away from their parents, and this newfound autonomy perfectly fulfills such psychological longing. According to the survey data conducted by Peng and Yu, 85.32% of incoming undergraduates agreed that they could finally unwind and enjoy life after entering university. A total of 73.55% of students held the view that they could arrange their own affairs freely and live comfortably. Meanwhile, 56.24% believed that knowledge, opportunities and personal capabilities lost due to occasional lying flat in college could be made up for through future hard work. Undoubtedly, students admitted to prestigious universities have long been immersed in high-intensity academic rivalry and borne heavy psychological strain to excel in the college entrance examination. They failed to timely ease academic setbacks and mental distress accumulated before enrollment. Under such circumstances, low-cost instant pleasure becomes the most accessible way for psychological compensation. They attain immediate mental satisfaction by lying flat, namely slacking off academically and indulging in entertainment and games, so as to make up for post-admission frustration and psychological imbalance. Nevertheless, such instant gratification can easily lead to addiction, further dampening learning motivation and increasing reliance on this compensatory pattern. This ultimately forms a vicious cycle: academic high pressure to avoidance of pressure to pursuit of compensation through enjoyment to resistance toward effort to escalation of stress following the ‘lying flat’ approach.” Details can be seen the Figure 2.



Figure 2. The Vicious Cycle of Pressure-Academic Lying-flat.

It is worth clarifying that compensatory gratification is not inherently negative. To a certain extent, it helps individuals relieve stress, regulate emotions and achieve psychological self-protection. However, excessive reliance on this mechanism, treating it as the sole means of coping with stress and setbacks while neglecting their academic development, potentially resulting in failing grades and delayed graduation. In such cases, compensatory gratification turns into a major psychological driver behind lying flat behaviors.

4.5. Escapism and Compensation Strategies Triggered by Procedural Competitive Stress

Competition refers to activities where individuals contend with others or groups to seize limited resources or goals, embodying the psychological desire and behavioral tendency to prevail. Competitive activities directly give rise to perceived competitive stress, which falls into two categories: outcome-oriented competitive stress and procedural competitive stress. Outcome-oriented competitive stress refers to tension and discomfort stemming from worries over competitive results. By contrast, procedural competitive stress denotes mental strain generated by ongoing competitive content and tasks. Such stress can trigger escapism and compensation strategies by posing threats to personal well-being (Wang et al., 2024). Escapism is a form of psychological compensation, through which people alleviate self-discrepancy by diverting attention and evading related contemplation. Research indicates that uncertainty severely undermines personal well-being and poses well-being threats. Based on the analysis of data from the 2015 Chinese General Social Survey conducted by, uncertainty exerts a notably adverse predictive effect on the well-being of young people aged from 18 to 45. Academic competition in prestigious universities features prominent longevity and uncertainty, within China’s higher education system, students’ academic rankings are primarily determined by their course performance during the first two years of university, while eligibility for postgraduate admission without entrance exams largely depends on their grade-level academic ranking. Therefore, if a student performs poorly in their first two academic years, they will likely no longer strive for “excellence” but merely aim to “pass” during the subsequent two years. This is because their poor starting ranking has already made it impossible to achieve higher honors within the class; consequently, they may simply adopt a “passive coping strategy,” focusing solely on graduating. For students aiming for postgraduate direct admission or seeking recognition for outstanding performance, every semester and every assignment must be executed flawlessly—each course must achieve an excellent grade. A single low score in any course could cost them the opportunity to secure admission; the remedial costs involved would often render three years of hard work futile. (Lin & Yang, 2023) Such persistent uncertainty over three years makes it difficult for these students to attain a stable sense of achievement.

The Advance-Avoidance Theory posits that individuals exhibit an innate tendency to choose “avoidance” rather than “approach,” using avoidance of stressors to alleviate negative emotions. This theory provides a compelling explanation for the behavioral choices of students at prestigious universities: the long-term, uncertain pressure of academic competition continuously undermines their sense of well-being, triggering negative emotions such as anxiety, frustration, and confusion; to mitigate these negative

emotions, these students often adopt an escape-compensation strategy—specifically, “lying flat” —to avoid confronting the discomfort associated with competition, thereby developing a sustained pattern of “lying flat” behavior.

3.6 Intense Pressure from Social Comparison

The generation of pressure through social comparison is a common sociopsychological phenomenon.: in order to conduct self-assessment, individuals often use others as a benchmark for evaluation, comparing their current status with this benchmark through horizontal comparisons; this process can give rise to psychological discomfort, which may trigger negative emotions such as anxiety or inferiority, and may also indirectly influence an individual’s behavioral choices and psychological state. This psychological phenomenon is particularly pronounced among college students from prestigious universities. Specifically, among students of Double First-Class universities, 69.13% stated that no matter how diligently they studied, there were always more accomplished peers, leading them to prefer enjoying life instead. simultaneously, these students have noted that within these highly competitive academic environments, their own competitive advantage is minimal—or even non-existent. (Wang et al., 2024). Top-tier universities gather high-scoring candidates and outstanding students nationwide, creating a student demographic vastly different from that of high school. During high school years, most of these students stood out within their classes and schools, holding an advantageous position in horizontal comparison, which granted them a strong sense of achievement and self-identity. Nevertheless, after entering elite institutions, they shift from being top performers to average individuals. In such an environment, they are forced to frequently engage in horizontal comparisons with more accomplished peers, discovering deficiencies in both their academic performance and practical experiences. Furthermore, advanced internet technologies facilitate easier access to even more outstanding peers among their age group. Research has found that when individuals compare themselves with others and perceive a shortage of their own resources or a disparity in their social status, they are more prone to feelings of dissatisfaction and disappointment (Smith et al., 2012); such persistent social comparisons can lead them to experience emotions such as inferiority, anxiety, and self-denial. Constant social comparison breeds feelings of inferiority, anxiety and self-denial. Prolonged setbacks will gradually drain people’s motivation to make progress, pushing them to adopt a lying flat mindset to evade reality (Ye, 2023). Additionally, confronted with unfavorable competitive circumstances and mounting pressure, students may develop lying flat tendencies as a passive way to cope with perceived inequities (Wang et al., 2024).

5. Intervention Strategies for Lying Flat Behaviors

Based on psychological theory, a multi-level intervention pathway is established to address the academic lying down behavior of college students. As shown in Figure 3., taking academic lying down behavior as the intervention object, five specific intervention measures are designed from multiple levels including family, individual, and school, thus forming a complete intervention implementation framework.

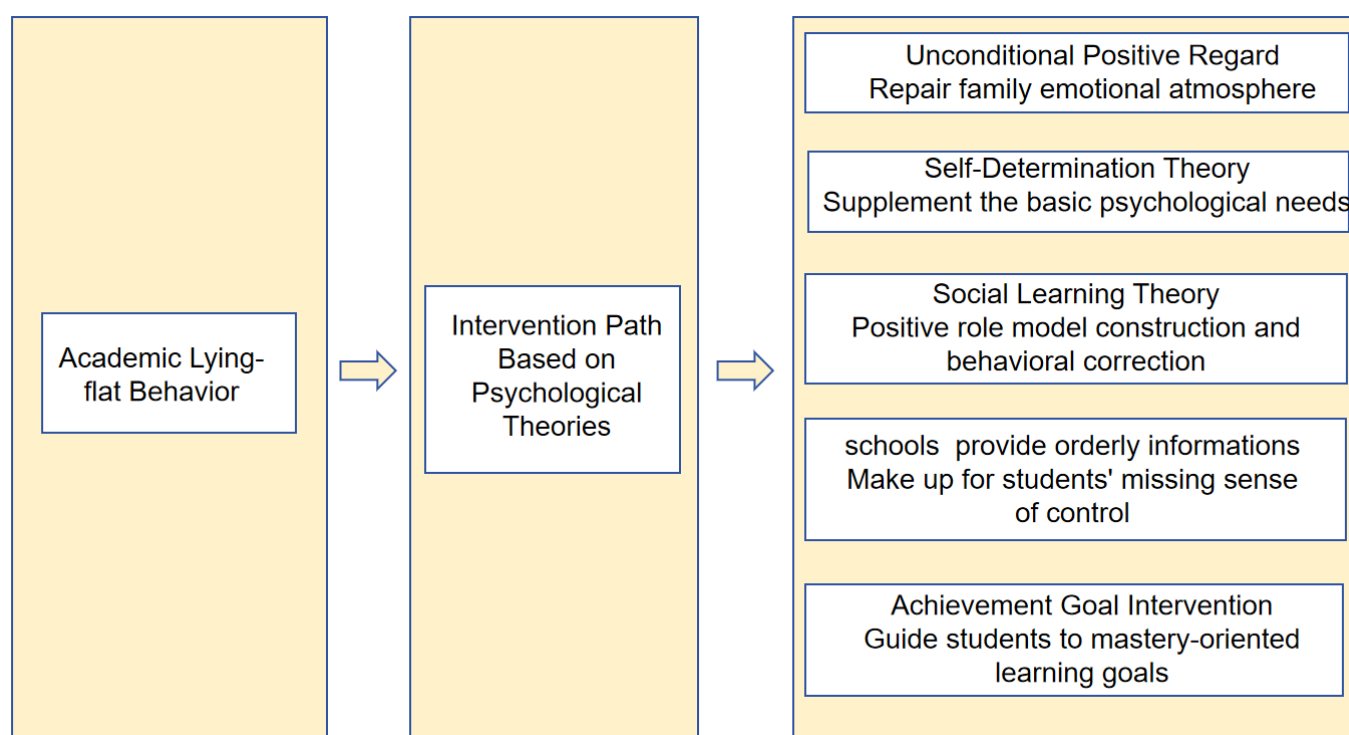


Figure 3. Intervention Pathway Diagram for Lying Flat Behavior

5.1. Conduct Peer Mutual Assistance via Role Models to Boost Self-Efficacy

The key to this measure lies in guiding college students to view their outstanding peers correctly, fostering communication and mutual support between undergraduate and graduate students, and helping them realize that peers are not merely competitors but also role models worthy of emulation. According to the Social Learning Theory (Bandura), an individual's behavioral learning does not stem solely from direct rewards or punishments; it can also occur through observing others' behaviors and their outcomes, actively imitating those behaviors, and thereby acquiring relevant skills. Meanwhile, self-efficacy occupies a central position in behavioral decision-making. Individuals with higher self-efficacy tend to proactively embrace challenges and sustain diligent efforts. By contrast, those with low self-efficacy are prone to resort to passive conducts including evasion, giving up and lying flat. Modern peer assistance has evolved beyond basic academic tutoring, developing into the establishment of all-encompassing growth communities that deliver value guidance and emotional bonding. When experience sharing among peers breaks the restriction of one-way instruction, and knowledge exchange integrates with emotional support to form a supportive interactive cycle, such two-way developmental assistance can reshape students' learning patterns. Achievements attained with peer support will subtly strengthen students' sense of self-efficacy (Ren, 2025; Zhu, 2025).

Meanwhile, academic counselors should collaborate with the university's Mental Health Center to communicate with students who exhibit "lying flat" behavior and guide them toward healthier alternatives; this is because the "lying flat" behavior observed among students at prestigious universities does not stem entirely from their own psychological struggles—rather, for some students, this behavior is acquired through observing and imitating the negative actions of peers, a phenomenon known as "conformist lying flat"; simultaneously, the university should also implement appropriate publicity or recognition programs for positive and outstanding students. If there is a lack of positive peer role models and a constructive learning environment on these campuses, a negative "lying flat" atmosphere may further intensify, leading more students toward such behavior; conversely, the presence of positive peer role models, a positive learning environment, and effective guidance can significantly enhance the self-efficacy of students at prestigious universities, enabling them to see tangible results and clear directions for their efforts, thereby reducing the prevalence of "lying flat" behavior.

5.2. Home-School Social Support to Meet Students' Basic Psychological Needs

The fulfillment of the three fundamental psychological needs—competence needs, autonomy needs, and relatedness needs—greatly determines an individual's sense of well-being, behavioral motivation, and psychological state. Fully satisfied basic psychological needs give rise to stronger intrinsic motivation and positive behavioral performance. By comparison, prolonged unmet psychological needs will lead to evasive and passive behaviors. The need for relatedness refers to the emotional desire to gain mutual respect, understanding and attachment in interpersonal interactions. Social support acts as the core means to satisfy the need for relatedness. It is defined as material and spiritual assistance that individuals obtain from social connections such as family members and friends (Yao & Guo, 2018). Research indicates that social support plays a mediating role in the relationship between effort-reward imbalance and learned helplessness. High levels of social support can mitigate the impact of effort-reward imbalance on learned helplessness; furthermore, when the degree of effort-reward imbalance is low, the protective effect of social support becomes more pronounced (Liu et al., 2024). In Double First-Class universities, students face intense competitive pressure, resulting in a lower degree of effort-reward imbalance compared to those in ordinary undergraduate programs, while the role of social support from both home and school becomes more significant. Furthermore, social support can effectively offset well-being threats brought by competitive pressure and environmental uncertainty, and greatly reduce escapism and compensatory behaviors represented by lying flat that stem from negative emotions (Wang et al., 2024). Accordingly, solid social support provided jointly by families and universities can fulfill students' basic psychological needs, maintain and improve their mental well-being, alleviate discomfort caused by competition, and ultimately curb their lying flat behaviors.

5.3. Establish an Environment of Unconditional Positive Regard

Research from around the world indicates that children's performance serves as a crucial source of parental self-worth. Given the emphasis on interdependent self-construction within face culture, this phenomenon is particularly pronounced among Chinese parents. Under the influence of Confucian culture, parenting patterns in Chinese families are marked by achievement orientation and relationship prioritization. Such parenting attaches great importance to children's academic performance, and closely links their academic attainments to family reputation as well as parent-child bonds. In this regard, Rogers' theory puts forward a pivotal psychological mediating mechanism. He coined the concept of conditional positive regard (), which means individuals can only gain affection and recognition when they meet specific external criteria. This mindset causes students to overemphasize academic results, equating good grades with being loved. Researches indicate that unconditional positive regard from families serves as a crucial external factor motivating young people to shift from lying flat to striving actively. It builds a safe haven for individuals to break free from the core belief that one is only worthy of affection by being outstanding (Guo, 2026).

A randomized controlled trial demonstrated that unconditional acceptance can alleviate negative emotions such as shame, anxiety, and a sense of helplessness in children when they encounter academic setbacks (Brummelman et al., 2014). Therefore, families should create a home environment characterized by unconditional positive attention, enabling children to face their mistakes and shortcomings with resilience, rather than resorting to self-limiting strategies to maintain their self-esteem (David et al., 2013) or enhance their sense of self-worth. When individuals no longer believe that they are only loved if they are excellent, but instead believe they will be loved unconditionally, their sense of self-worth will increase; they will no longer rely on external factors, will not let setbacks fundamentally negate their self-worth, and will ultimately choose to adopt a “lying flat” attitude. Given the prevalence of child-centered value orientations within Asian cultures, parents who practice unconditional self-acceptance—meaning that regardless of whether they achieve success in important parenting tasks, they can fully accept themselves—can effectively provide their children with unconditional acceptance. Parents who have activated this practice of unconditional self-acceptance are more likely to be willing to offer unconditional acceptance to their children (Tsang & Lam, 2023). Consequently, the state and society should promote and guide parents toward practicing unconditional self-acceptance and foster a family atmosphere marked by unconditional positive attention; however, it is important to note that unconditional acceptance of children is not blind love, nor is it the uncritical tolerance of a child’s inappropriate behavior—such as the approach of permissive parenting—which entails abandoning the responsibility of establishing rules and providing guidance. Rather than reacting to inappropriate behavior by conflating the child’s actions with their personality—meaning that while you still love the child, you do not endorse their behavior—you should employ an authoritative approach to implement gentle yet firm disciplinary measures, thereby helping the child improve.

5.4. Reconstruct Self-Perception and Correct Negative Attribution

Self-perception constitutes an essential part of personal growth and development. Only with accurate self-cognition can individuals formulate rational plans for future development. Research has found that personalized support and the reinforcement of self-beliefs are essential for optimizing educational outcomes during the critical transition period from secondary school to higher education (Raufelder et al., 2026). During this pivotal transition from high school to university, the reinforcement of self-beliefs plays a vital role; the core approach involves collaboration between families and schools to help students transition from “conditional self-acceptance” to “unconditional self-acceptance,” while facilitating the reconstruction of their sense of meaning and helping them develop a more accurate perspective on themselves (Wang, 2025). Inaccurate and unrealistic self-perception tends to give rise to cognitive flaws including excessive sensitivity, overconfidence, harsh self-criticism, compulsive self-display and excessive self-concealment. To alleviate intense psychological conflicts, anxiety and self-doubt stemming from substantial self-discrepancy, college students need to re-evaluate themselves. They may moderately adjust their expectations for the ideal self or strive to improve their actual self. Formulating feasible study plans and attaining minor accomplishments helps restore self-confidence and mitigate learned helplessness. Adopting strategies of cognitive restructuring, diversified motivation, peer encouragement and tiered requirements can gradually help students overcome helplessness and rebuild academic confidence and life motivation (Zhang, 2026). It is vital for students to develop positive self-attribution instead of persistent self-denial and self-criticism. This approach serves to enhance self-efficacy, establish objective self-view and achieve the reconstruction of self-perception.

5.5. Schools Providing Orderly Information to Compensate for Students’ Lack of Control

The compensatory control theory focuses on the correlation between individuals’ sense of control and psychological state, providing crucial theoretical support for alleviating the lying flat behaviors of elite university students caused by environmental uncertainty. The core tenet of the theory is that a sense of control is one of humans’ basic psychological needs. When individuals are confronted with external pressure and threats, their sense of control will decline significantly, undermining their well-being and triggering negative emotions and behaviors such as anxiety and avoidance. Meanwhile, the theory indicates that individuals’ sense of control is compensatory. When the sense of control is threatened, access to environmental information that delivers order, certainty and predictability can partially offset the lack of control, relieve anxious negative emotions and realize effective compensation for the sense of control. According to a report by *Guangming Daily*, only 27.6% of students at undergraduate institutions in China exhibit the “integration of aspiration and action” profile—those with clear developmental goals and active learning attitudes. Even within “Double First-Class” universities, this proportion stands at merely 24.4%. Due to the long-standing influence of an exam-oriented culture and the pressures of excessive exam-driven competition during China’s basic education phase, a significant portion of high-achieving students enrolled in Double First-Class universities find themselves with vague career development goals. Universities shall provide targeted academic analysis and guidance for students to clarify their future efforts and reduce the uncertainty of academic competition. First, universities should guide students to formulate practical study plans. Counselors and supervisors can assist students in developing detailed and actionable study plans based on their academic foundation and personal goals, clarifying phased learning tasks, implementation procedures and time schedules. This enables students to take charge of their own learning rhythm. In addition, students should be guided to adjust their study plans timely in accordance with learning progress, so that

the plans can maintain guidance and operability. This helps students perceive the orderliness and predictability of academic learning and compensates for their deficient sense of control. Furthermore, universities shall offer differentiated academic and career guidance for students of different grades. For instance, major cognition guidance for freshmen, academic planning and scientific research guidance for sophomores and juniors, as well as employment and further study guidance for seniors. Such systematic guidance allows students to clearly grasp the developmental paths and goals for their four years of university study, reduces future uncertainty, and strengthens their sense of control over personal development.

5.6. Promoting the GPA Reform and Encouraging Students to Engage in Self-directed Learning

The Achievement Goal Theory (AGT) posits that students develop different types of achievement goals, which shape their learning motivation and learning strategies (Ames, 1992; Elliot & Hulleman, 2017). This theory distinguishes between mastery goals (which can stimulate intrinsic motivation and promote deep learning engagement) and performance goals (typically associated with extrinsic motivation and superficial learning strategies). This theoretical framework is highly applicable in both task-driven learning (TDI) contexts—where external performance indicators may reinforce focus on performance goals—and self-directed learning (SDL) scenarios—where the latter is expected to foster learning behaviors oriented toward mastery goals (Schweder & Raufelder, 2022). In the context of rapid social development, the pursuit of efficiency has become prevalent, and the concept of “performance-oriented mindset” has gained widespread acceptance. Chinese universities continuously strengthen students’ competitive awareness through methods such as competitive evaluations, resource allocation, and identity labeling. Specifically, grade point averages (GPA) have become the core criterion for assessing student value, directly influencing awards, eligibility for post-graduate admission, and even opportunities to join the Communist Party. This “score-based heroism” mechanism compels students to devote substantial effort to course examinations rather than genuine academic exploration, steering them toward performance goals rather than mastery goals. For students, GPA was originally merely a means of evaluation but has now become the end goal itself, while actual learning outcomes are often overlooked. Performance-oriented learning goals are associated with surface-level learning strategies; such strategies require students to focus on achieving higher grades or surpassing their peers through methods like rote memorization and recitation (Castejon et al., 2016), which hinders students’ ability to engage in deep learning and exploration. Therefore, universities should implement reforms to their grade point systems and encourage the enhancement of students’ comprehensive competencies and diversified development in processes such as departmental award evaluations and excellence assessments—such as the “coarse-grained grading system” adopted by Peking University. At the same time, it cannot be denied that a large number of students only begin studying after receiving mandatory tasks such as assignments, reports, or exams; without external task constraints, they are highly prone to procrastination or neglecting their study plans—essentially engaging in TDI learning. In contrast, SDL can foster mastery of learning objectives and the adoption of deep learning strategies, while reducing reliance on surface-level learning strategies, making it an effective method for enhancing learning motivation and engagement (Schweder et al., 2026). Thus, we should leverage grade point system reforms to allocate sufficient time for students to explore their personal interests, necessitating the implementation of instructional designs that cultivate self-motivation and guide students toward SDL.

6. Limitations and Reflections

6.1. Limitations of Theoretical Application

This paper constitutes a conceptual theoretical study aimed at constructing a multi-theoretical integrated framework for analyzing psychological mechanisms. The psychological theories adopted in this study, including learned helplessness, self-discrepancy theory, and social learning theory, are general theories in the field of psychology. No original psychological theory has been proposed here. Although this study interprets these theories in specific scenarios based on the group characteristics of students from prestigious universities, it lacks exclusive theoretical frameworks tailored to this particular student group. The core assumptions and empirical conclusions of conventional psychological theories are established based on general student populations. In contrast, elite university students are characterized by high admission thresholds, intense competitive pressure, and prominent identity gaps, leading to distinct psychological conditions and behavioral patterns that differ from ordinary college students. Therefore, the applica-

bility and explanatory power of these universal theories among elite student groups require further empirical verification. For example, targeted empirical research is still lacking regarding whether the manifestations and triggering mechanisms of compensatory gratification differ between elite university students and ordinary students. In addition, the hierarchical order and weight distribution of the three basic psychological needs proposed in self-determination theory also need further exploration within the elite student population.

6.2. Limitations of Research Methods

This study primarily adopts literature research and theoretical analysis methods to explore the psychological mechanisms underlying the lying flat phenomenon and to construct corresponding intervention strategies based on existing theoretical deductions and literature reviews. However, the research lacks support from first-hand empirical data. Furthermore, due to practical constraints, the study was unable to conduct questionnaire surveys, in-depth interviews, or field research specifically targeting students from prestigious universities; the current study fails to explore heterogeneous characteristics and differentiated causes of lying flat behaviors across different majors, grades, genders, and family backgrounds. For instance, unanswered questions remain regarding the discrepancies in lying flat motivations between liberal arts and science and engineering students, the developmental differences in lying flat tendencies between freshmen and junior students, and the underlying influence mechanism of family economic status on elite students' academic disengagement. As a result, the causal analysis and intervention strategies proposed in this study possess general rationality yet lack sufficient specificity and refinement for diverse student subgroups.

6.3. Insufficient Practicability of Intervention Strategies

Although this study designed intervention measures based on the principle of integrating theory with practice to ensure practical operability, it fails to fully consider realistic constraints in educational administration. Some strategies remain difficult to implement on a large scale among students in prestigious universities. For example, providing personalized academic guidance and stratified learning plans requires substantial human resources from academic supervisors and counselors. Faced with a large student population, it is practically infeasible to deliver one-on-one tailored guidance for every student. Therefore, further refinement of implementation schemes is needed to make the intervention strategies more adaptable to the actual educational management environment of elite universities. Moreover, certain intervention approaches pose considerable implementation difficulties. For instance, under the profound influence of Confucian culture and traditional Chinese education, questions remain regarding how to transition China's family environments from a model of "conditional positive attention" to one of "unconditional positive attention," and how to encourage students to utilize their free time for Self-Directed Learning (SDL) rather than engaging in leisure or entertainment activities—areas that require further research.

6.4. Limitations of Research Perspective

This study focuses primarily on psychological mechanisms and psychological intervention design, explaining the lying flat phenomenon solely from the perspective of individual psychological factors. However, it falls short in exploring social factors. Although the study does consider factors such as "meritocracy," the exam-oriented culture, the homogeneity of academic assessment formats, and the influence of Confucian culture on family education, these aspects are not explored in sufficient depth and require further refinement in future research.

7. Conclusion and Future Directions

7.1. Conclusions

This study focuses on the specific phenomenon of "lying flat" among elite university students. Supported by multiple psychological theories and adopting literature research and theoretical analysis methods, it systematically analyzes the deep-seated psychological causes of "lying flat" among these students and constructs targeted psychological intervention paths. The core research conclusions are as follows:

7.1.1. Causes of "Lying Flat" Phenomenon

The emergence of the "lying flat" phenomenon among elite university students results from the synergistic and mutually reinforcing effects of multiple psychological factors, primarily driven by learned helplessness, erroneous attribution patterns, self-discrepancy, social comparison pressure, procedural competitive stress, and compensatory gratification. Among these, social comparison pressure and procedural competitive stress serve as external triggers, self-discrepancy acts as an internal trigger, learned helplessness functions as a cognitive trigger, and compensatory gratification acts as a reinforcing factor.

7.1.2. The Scientific Intervention Path of "Lying Flat"

Intervention-related theories such as social learning theory, self-determination theory, compensatory control theory, Achievement Goal Theory, and unconditional positive regard are highly applicable to interventions targeting “lying flat” among elite university students. These theories provide a scientific theoretical framework for such interventions from multiple perspectives including behavioral imitation, psychological needs, and the enhancement of sense of control, offering evidence-based intervention paths for students, parents, and universities alike.

7.1.3. “Lying Flat” is a Psychological Discomfort Behavior that Requires Intervention

“Lying flat” among elite university students is not a result of becoming complacent after gaining admission to prestigious institutions. Instead, it represents a form of psychological maladjustment and escapist behavior triggered by challenges such as high-intensity competition, significant identity gaps, and unmet psychological needs. Beneath these behaviors lie deep-seated psychological needs including helplessness in the face of pressure, self-doubt, and resistance to competition. Rather than merely making moral judgments or criticisms, it is crucial to understand and accept these students based on their unique group characteristics, and implement targeted psychological interventions to guide them out of their psychological dilemmas.

7.2. Future Prospects

The lying flat phenomenon among students from prestigious universities is an emerging issue amid the development of higher education and intensifying social competition, which bears important theoretical and practical research value. Follow-up studies can conduct in-depth exploration and expansion in the following aspects to enrich relevant research and improve its scientificity and practical value.

7.2.1. Conduct Empirical Research to Enhance Pertinence and Refinement

Subsequent research may adopt multiple research methods including questionnaire survey, in-depth interview and case study to carry out primary empirical research targeting elite university students. Researchers can select students of diverse majors, grade levels and family backgrounds as research subjects. By selecting participants from diverse academic majors, grade levels, and family backgrounds, such studies can gather first-hand empirical evidence to demonstrate the scientific rigor and validity of the research, thereby enabling a precise understanding of the distinct characteristics, specific causes, and behavioral manifestations associated with their “lying flat” attitude. Meanwhile, empirical tests on theoretical applicability can be implemented to verify the fitness and explanatory power of general psychological theories when applied to this student group.

7.2.2. Integrate Multidisciplinary Perspectives to Enrich Theoretical Research System

Future research can break the constraints of purely psychological research perspectives, and establish multidisciplinary research frameworks by incorporating theories from pedagogy, sociology, philosophy and other disciplines. From the pedagogical perspective, researchers can explore how homogenized educational evaluation systems and talent cultivation modes in universities affect students’ lying flat behaviors. From sociological and philosophical standpoints, analysis can be conducted on how employment pressure, academic credential involution and social expectations exert impacts on elite college students.

7.2.3. Implement Intervention Practices to Test and Optimize Intervention Strategies

Follow-up research can cooperate with prestigious universities to select students with lying flat tendencies as research participants for empirical verification of formulated intervention paths. The strategies proposed in this study can be put into actual educational management practice. Researchers shall track intervention outcomes and collect feedback from students, counselors and parents. Continuous optimization and revision will be conducted according to practical effects, so that intervention measures can better adapt to the actual educational operation of elite universities, and secure long-term and sound intervention efficacy.

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