*Article*

# Using photo-voice to understand factors affecting mental health at a high school in China

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**Abstract**
A study at a high school in Shenzhen, China, was conducted to better understand student perspectives on mental health and factors that affected their mental health. A photo-voice method was used, where students were asked to take pictures corresponding to topics related to mental health and describe these photos to the lead researcher. The interviews were analysed through thematic analysis. Three main themes emerged: personal motivation and social cohesion were determined as factors that greatly affected mental wellness, whereas optimism was determined as a method of coping that was used by all participants. Although this research is exploratory, the emergent themes can be used as suggestions for culturally appropriate psychoeducation and mental healthcare practices. This research can also be used as a starting point for further research.

**Keywords**
mental health, youth, China, client-centred, photo-voice

**Résumé**
Une étude a été menée dans une école secondaire à Shenzhen, en Chine, afin de mieux comprendre les perspectives des élèves sur la santé mentale ainsi que les facteurs influençant leur bien-être psychologique. Une méthode photo-voix a été utilisée : les élèves ont été invités à prendre des photos en lien avec des sujets liés à la santé mentale et à décrire ces images à la chercheuse principale. Les entretiens ont été analysés à l'aide d'une analyse thématique. Trois thèmes principaux ont émergé : la motivation personnelle et la cohésion sociale ont été identifiées comme des facteurs influençant fortement le bien-être mental, tandis que l'optimisme a été identifié comme une stratégie d'adaptation utilisée par tous les participants et participantes. Bien que cette recherche soit exploratoire, les thèmes dégagés peuvent servir de base pour proposer des pratiques psychoéducatives et de soins psychologiques culturellement adaptées. Cette étude peut également servir de point de départ pour des recherches futures.

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## Introduction

Social work is a relatively new profession in China and has yet to establish a clearly defined role, in both schools and the mental health landscape (Li & Yu, 2008; Yuan et al., 2021). Existing social work roles are often ambiguous, reflecting underlying tensions between governmental priorities and service users' needs (Niu & Haugen, 2019). Although the role of social work remains largely unrecognised across China, it holds considerable potential to address issues such as supporting migrant students, addressing family-related challenges, promoting student mental health, tackling gender disparities, and more (Levine & Zhu, 2010).

In this nascent period of social work development, there is both the opportunity and need to develop indigenous theories, practices, and policies. Additional research must be done to highlight the priorities of students within the social work profession. This research sought to illuminate local concepts of mental health described by high-school youth in China. Current research on mental health in China mainly uses definitions from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) (Kolstad & Gjesvik, 2014), which has advantages and disadvantages. The application of Western biomedical frameworks of neuropsychiatry has allowed for studies in genetic, neurostructural, neurochemical and other biological pathways in disease research in China (Que et al., 2019). However, the lack of indigenous or local definitions of mental health raises concerns due to the culturally insensitive nature of positivistic biomedical approaches (Redvers, 2020; Summerfield, 2013; Thakker & Ward, 1998). Research with students and youth based on local epistemologies and frameworks are even more scarce in China (Yu et al., 2019). This research addresses gaps in mental health research by empowering Chinese students to identify concepts that contribute to a holistic understanding of mental health. This arts-based exploratory research addresses what youth described as key factors influencing their mental health.

This paper begins by addressing the existing literature on mental health in China, including the cultural relevancy of mental health services and frameworks, and the necessity of addressing the mental health of youth. Recognizing the lack of qualitative, indigenous defined mental health concepts in youth mental health in China, photo-voice was used to encourage an organic discussion. The resulting thematic analysis revealed three major themes that affected the participants' mental health: optimism, social cohesion, and personal motivation. Pioneering new mental health frameworks centred on the voices of Chinese youth, this research offers a powerful strategy to dismantle stigma, creating transformative mental health services and education.

**Cultural relevancy**

Although there exists debate around the indigenization of mental health discourses in related areas (Huang & Zhang, 2008), the Western disease model continues to dominate, best seen through the centring of this model in mental health literature from China, which structures policies, psychoeducation, and service provision similarly to Western models (Que et al., 2019; Xu et al., 2022). Concerns around cultural relevancy of mental health concepts have been well documented (Kolstad & Gjesvik, 2014; Kuo & Kavanagh, 1994; Yip, 2005), but few studies have addressed the indigenization of mental health epistemology in the Chinese context (Cheung & Liu, 2004; Zhao et al., 2023). There has not been significant cultivation of mental health concepts rooted in traditional Chinese knowledges. This lack of indigenization limits the effectiveness of psychoeducation on stigma in China (Xu et al., 2017; Yang et al., 2012), reduces accessibility and efficacy of treatments (Leong & Lau, 2001), narrows treatment options (Bracken et al., 2012) and challenges the cultural validity of mental illness classifications (Jablensky, 1999; Thakker & Ward, 1998).

Despite attempts to use biomedical frameworks to educate the population, there has been limited evidence suggesting its effectiveness in decreasing stigma (Ren et al., 2020). Other research demonstrates that stigma in China has not been reduced, despite the central government's endorsement of mental health advancements (Xu et al., 2017). On the contrary, the introduction of Western labels and concepts of mental and emotional wellness still hold high levels of stigma in the population (Yang et al., 2015). Attempts to reduce stigma should not focus solely on Western concepts, but rather target the traditional values of Chinese culture (Xu et al., 2017).

Existing literature that relates traditional Chinese concepts to mental health touch on aspects of traditional Chinese medicine (addressing internal harmony), Confucianism (self-discipline as a route to collective harmony), and Taoism (the acceptance of nature and reality) (Yip, 2005). Whereas there is limited literature in Chinese journals that address various psychological states and symptoms from the perspective of traditional Chinese medicine (Geng & Wang, 2008; Li, 2001), the application of these concepts continue to rely on Western psychiatry to measure efficacy (Gan et al., 2022; Zhao et al., 2017).

This research provides an alternative viewpoint to dominant Western disease models through a creative exploratory study into understandings of mental health through the lens of Chinese youth.

**Youth mental health**

Adolescents face particular challenges during a critical developmental stage, balancing academic pressures (Quach et al., 2015), relationships (Shek, 2005), identity formation (Wu & Ou, 2023), and self-esteem (Ng et al., 2008). Epidemiology studies using Western diagnostic frameworks have pointed out the severity of mental health issues among youth in China, with suicide being a leading cause of death (Parry, 2014), and various studies reporting suicidal ideation prevalence between 13-16% among Chinese adolescents (Hesketh et al., 2002; Yan & Gai, 2022). Anxiety

and depression rates are estimated at 16-24% (Jin et al., 2014), and even higher among university students (Jiang et al., 2015; Steptoe et al., 2007).

Concerns regarding cultural relevancy continue to exist in youth mental health literature, where much focus is placed on foreign training and standardization of diagnostic categories in Western frameworks (Zheng & Zheng, 2015). Due to this, few studies inquire about non-Western definitions of mental health. Arts-based methods such as photo-voice are helpful in critical multicultural practice that addresses limitations of the biomedical model (Lenette, 2019), and in eliciting youth voices (Golden et al., 2024). While photo-voice has been worldwide to document mental health research with youth (Stephens et al., 2023), this study is the first to explore the topic with Chinese youth.

## Methods
### Purpose
The main research question being addressed is "what concepts do Chinese high school students use when describing daily mental health concerns?" This research was conducted with a constructivist perspective that acknowledges all experiences as real and worthy of equal consideration (Karasz & Singelis, 2009). Qualitative interview data and an arts-based data collection method were used to capture subjective perspectives, and thematic analysis was used to highlight participant voices (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Thambinathan & Kinsella, 2021).

### Theoretical underpinnings
While much of Western mental health research is quantitative in nature and assumes a positivistic stance on epistemology, research on non-Western understandings of mental health tend to build on social constructionist understandings of health through cultural relativism, addressing different realities of mental health that exist between people and cultures (Moodley & Sutherland, 2010). To address the epistemic injustice of Western hegemonic mental health models, diverse epistemologies and data should be treated as equally important and valuable in understanding mental health. Qualitative data is often chosen to explore concepts that do not adhere to Western positivistic notions of measurement, as it provides participants with opportunities to construct concepts that are relevant to them.

### Participants
This research project took place in a private high school in Shenzhen, a highly populated city in China. The students ranged in age from 16 to 18 years old. The high school was a partial boarding school where students had living quarters, but many returned home for evenings or weekends. Upon graduation, students would be provided with a high school diploma from an English-speaking country, with most students aiming to attend international universities.

Convenience sampling took place through various extracurricular clubs. Due to campus restrictions on technological devices, only students in the last two grade levels were recruited. All students in the last two grades were eligible, and one of the participants happened to have a

formal mental illness diagnosis that was revealed without prompting. There was a total of three participants, two male and one female. One participant was in their last year of high school and two were in their second to last year.

**Data collection**
***Photo-voice method***
Photo-voice allows participants to communicate through photography and provides an art-based method of data collection that is participant-driven, inclusive of artistic abilities, and can address linguistic barriers. Abridged from its full form as a democratic and accessible tool to address policy needs (Wang, 2006), this study used the photos to elicit responses to researcher-determined prompts. Meanwhile, data elicited during interviews included both descriptions of the photos as well as the ensuing discussions brought about by the photos. As such, photo-voice was used as a bridge to convey meaning, with most of the data being sourced from the interviews, allowing the participants to use the photos to address language barriers and to convey messages that may be difficult to articulate with words.

***Protocol***
The exact method used in this study involve the following: 1) four prompts were chosen for their vague relation to mental health (success 成功, stress 压力, hope 希望, and despair 绝望). The prompts were purposefully vague and did not contain any overt references to mental health to allow the student's own concepts of mental health to be emphasised; 2) participants were instructed to take pictures that represented the prompts; 3) participants were interviewed about their photos.

The prompts were decided in cooperation with mental health counsellors at the school and chosen for their simplicity and commonality while still leaving enough room for interpretation and discussion. This choice was an effort to avoid technical terms which may have been influenced by biomedical frameworks.

There was an initial meeting with each participant, where participants were briefed with the research methods and given the prompts. Participants were asked to take photos that represented how they related to the prompts. Participants were aware that this project was related to mental health but were not given any instructions related to mental health. They were instructed to avoid taking pictures of others and were notified that any photos that included photos of others would not be included in the final research report. However, all photos provided by the participants included others, resulting in the final research report lacking in photo examples to accompany the interview data.

Follow-up interviews were scheduled 2-4 weeks after the initial meeting, during which the participants were given the opportunity to take photos. Participants were able to contact the researchers at any time at the researchers' office on campus. Students used their own phones or cameras. They took photos after school or during weekends, when they had the opportunity to leave school grounds. The interviews took place in October and November 2019, lasted between

20 and 30 minutes, and were conducted in a room within the mental health department. Interviews were typically conducted during lunch break or after school. Participants were asked to introduce the pictures and explain how they corresponded to the assigned prompts or were relevant to their lives. The interviews were unstructured, allowing an organic flow of conversation, encouraging participants to emphasize the topics they found most important. Whereas some participants were comfortable conducting the interview in English, some opted to have the interview conducted in Mandarin. In the findings section, all quotations will be presented in the language spoken, with English translations provided as needed.

**Ethical considerations**

The researchers received ethics clearance from the Wilfrid Laurier University Research Ethics Board (File number 6267).

The consent form contained a description of the purpose of the study, data collection and storage, confidentiality, duration, participant tasks, potential risks, and participant rights. All students under the age of 18 needed a consent form signed by a legal guardian. There were unfortunately no opportunities to meet with legal guardians. Students were allowed to keep photos they personally collected, but the researchers destroyed all identifying data two years after collection, including recordings and photos. The risk of bringing up distressing topics was mitigated by the counselling resources directly available at the school. Fortunately, there were no known issues stemming from participation in this project. All participants responded that they found the project to be a positive experience.

**Data analysis**

Data analysis was conducted using Microsoft Excel for transcription, translation, and coding. Coding was completed solely by the first author, but both researchers shared transcription and translation roles. Another mental health counsellor reviewed the results of the data analysis in May 2022 and confirmed the ongoing relevancy of the identified themes throughout and after the COVID-19 pandemic, as the data was collected prior to the global pandemic.

**Data analysis framework**

The data analysis method followed the six steps of thematic analysis, including familiarization with data, initial code generation, organizing key ideas, tracing ideas back to the research question and theoretical perspective, defining, and then selecting themes (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

A number of theoretical assumptions must be stated to clarify the approach used for the thematic analysis in this research project (Byrne, 2022). In addition to establishing a constructionist approach, the researchers also acknowledge the findings to be a result of the interaction between (1) the data as obtained by the researchers, (2) the researchers' lens of understanding, as well as (3) the researchers' skill and technique in coding the data.

To contextualise the researchers' lens of interpretation, it is pertinent to note the backgrounds of the researchers involved. The second author is a Chinese national whose native language is Chinese, while the first author is Canadian with Chinese cultural background and conversational fluency in Mandarin. The researchers were approximately 10-15 years older than the participants. These demographic factors assisted the researchers in relating to the experiences of the participants. The analysis was done inductively, whereby open coding was used to construct themes rather than coding data through a predetermined theory. The prompts of hope, despair, success, and stress assisted in bringing out ideas relevant to mental health and many of the findings include quotations and references to the themes, but these prompts were otherwise not used as part of the analysis. This open coding analysis was instrumental in preventing researcher assumptions to take precedence. Both semantic and latent coding methods were employed to extract and interpret meaning from the data, allowing researchers to honour participants' voices while also acknowledging that the emerging themes are a result of the intersection between the data and researcher interpretation.

## Findings

This study examined various indications in the students' interviews that would assist in creating an understanding of factors affecting mental health in the students' lives. Through the thematic analysis method (Braun & Clarke, 2019), the researchers found three main themes in the interviews: optimism, social cohesion, and personal motivation. Each of these had various sub-themes which further described how these themes affected mental health. These themes had some overlapping ideas in their sub-themes, illustrating how the various aspects of the students' lives and identity were intertwined.

### Optimism

*Optimism* was described by the students as a method of persevering and looking toward the future to endure current struggles. This theme manifested in different sub-themes, such as (1) *hope from others*, (2) *personal interest* and (3) *internalization*, which illustrated the nature of *Optimism* and how it manifested in their lives.

### *Hope from others*

The first sub-theme within the larger theme of *Optimism* was *hope from others*, which illustrated the general thought that other people were important to maintain a positive attitude, whether it be through family interdependence or a prosperous national psyche. Participants stated that established relationships, such as close friendships and family, provided hope, encouragement, and motivation to keep going. One participant, a second-year student, mentioned the continued health of one's parents as a motivation to continue living: "我妈告诉我虽然说外公走了, 她的妈妈还在, 她妈妈也是继续让我妈生活下去的一个动力, 也是一个希望. [My mom told me that even though grandpa was gone, her mother was still there, her mother was also motivation

for her to continue living on, also a hope.]" Participants mentioned a variety of ways that relationships provided a sense of hope, such as receiving recognition, feeling encouraged by team members, and gaining inspiration when others achieve their goals. This relational aspect of *Optimism* provides an important clue to the relevance of interpersonal support for Chinese adolescents.

### Personal interest

The participants' future goals were a large factor that provided hope. These goals may serve as reasons to move forward when faced with difficult situations. An interesting component of this *personal interest* was a sense of independence. One participant described that they might thrive in a situation that is different from others, while another participant noted that regardless of what others prioritized, they chose to engage in a variety of activities that made them happy. All the participants noted that their *personal interest* played a large role in their decisions and happiness, whether that be through career decisions or small activities that they enjoyed with their friends. This motivation to pursue *personal interests* provided critical insight into the students' perspective on mental health as it describes a core emotional regulation method.

### Internalization

The last sub-theme was *internalization*. The participants frequently mentioned the need to acknowledge criticism, find self-encouragement, and move on from a difficult situation. Participants identified parts of self that are not up to par, or have disappointed others, and mentioned the need to respond with improvement. This was mentioned in the context of sports, grades, and skills. In addition, they emphasized the importance of being able to persevere in difficult situations through self-encouragement. One third-year student, when asked about perseverance, provided the following example: "…I sometimes got very depressed, and I even tried to turn to suicide, but finally I keep just tell myself keep going do not ask why, and I keep live, so…". This self-encouragement describes a form of positive self-talk that has been shown to be a key piece in developing constructive behaviour (Mulawarman et al., 2024). All sub-themes describe the use of *Optimism* as a major coping mechanism used by the participants. Using the theme of *Optimism* as a framework for understanding coping mechanisms could potentially feel more natural to Chinese students that may have trouble with other explanations of coping mechanisms.

### Social cohesion

From the participants' point of view, *Social cohesion* is a factor that affected mental wellness. Although *Social cohesion* eludes concrete definition (Chuang et al., 2013), it has been determined as an important factor in both physical and mental health (Miao et al., 2019; Zhang et al., 2021). The term *Social cohesion* is used in this paper to describe the shared beliefs and societal expectations that prioritise maintaining harmony within society and fostering positive relationships. Participants mentioned stress from academic pressure and class rankings as well as

fears of disappointing others and themselves. The youth mentioned that comparisons to others, criticisms from self and others, and overall pressure to perform well affected their self-confidence and self-esteem. The sub-themes of *Social cohesion* that manifested in the data included (1) *blending in* (2) *interdependence* with people close to you (3) *responsibility to others* and (4) *parental influence*.

### Blending in

The participants mentioned the need to *blend in* as a factor that affected their lives, but the need to *blend in* also made it difficult to find representations of negative topics in public when using the photo-voice method. The participants stated that it was easy to find representations of conflict but not despair. This could be due to the pressure to conform in public, resulting in preservation of a positive public image (Oetzel et al., 2001), and may affect mental health through emotional suppression and social obligations. Further research is needed to determine whether this phenomenon effects the usage of photo-voice in this setting, as well as consideration for additional methods to better investigate this aspect of *Social cohesion*.

### Interdependence

*Interdependence* describes how close relationships provide emotional comfort. When talking about a photo taken of an elderly couple, one participant, a third-year student, commented that even the memory of a significant relationship can provide emotional support: "Because I think they marry for long years and they didn't have any unhappy or something else… Maybe there is one day the granny is gone, and grandpa stay alone. And the picture is there, the memory." Another participant, a second-year student, commented that the knowledge that there are others they can rely on is a comforting factor: "Yes. Just that if my friend, doesn't know or have difficulties I can help them, then others will help me, it's quite good."

These excerpts suggest that even thoughts of significant relationships can offer emotional support. This sub-theme of *interdependence* does not fully align with the *Optimism* theme of *hope from others* as it does not address how the others actively provide motivation and hope. Instead, these examples underscore the role of relationships in bringing a sense of comfort. This comfort derived from close interpersonal relationships may be particularly relevant when discussing interpersonal dynamics and emotional regulation.

### Responsibility to others

The sub-theme *responsibility to others* captures participants' shared sense of burden in meeting the expectations imposed by others. While the sub-theme *hope from others*, situated within the broader theme of *Optimism*, highlights the benefits of maintaining close relationships, participants did not seem to significantly mention the benefit of mutual care in the context of society or in more distant relationships. Instead, distant relationships carried the burden of obligation rather than mutual support, adhering to Confucius standards of collective harmony

(Yip, 2005). A participant, a second-year student, spoke of an example of such obligation when referring to a photo of a relay race that they participated in at school:

> 我其实一直觉得接力, 接力挺有压力的, 因为它不是你一个人, 是 4 个人嘛, … 是一棒,… 二棒的话然后发现我跑的比对面二棒的要慢, 然后就会让我们的三棒有压力, … 所以说就是不能让自己比其他的二棒慢太多 [I actually think, relay race is quite stressful, it's not just yourself, it's four people, … If I am running as the first or second runner, and then see that I am slower than the second runner from the other team, and then this will make our third runner feel pressure, … so I can't let myself be much slower than the second runner of the other teams]

Obligations to the collective can potentially place a strain on individuals when there is less obvious mutual care, adding to students' stress. To ensure culturally responsive mental health support, it is important to acknowledge the occasional necessity of fulfilling social obligations as a lived reality.

### *Parental influence*

One final sub-theme is *parental influence*, as parents were mentioned frequently. Whereas family in general was discussed in both negative and positive light, *parental influence* often focused on parental expectations that participants felt pressured to meet. Referencing a photo of their younger brother, one participant, a third-year student, mentioned:

> I think he is stressed about the relationship between himself and our father… Because indeed my father sometimes always told him, "You should do your homework first, before you take rest, you should do your homework." He is always likely to ask him "Did you finish your homework," like this.

Students are ranked by academic performance during examinations and many Chinese parents are highly invested in the class rankings of their children and their possibility of admission into well-known universities (Chen et al., 2021). The students spoke of academic pressures both within and outside of their parental relationships. However, they also highly valued these relationships. Sharing a photo of a boy and his father, a third-year student stated that the boy in the photo had lost his mother at a young age and commented "他父亲可能是他继续在这个世界长大的一个希望 [His father might be his hope in continuing to grow up in this world]." The participants looked up to their parents, did not want to disappoint them, and their parents in turn provided them hope and security. As such, *parental influence* appeared to function as a key moderating factor, shaping participants' responses to stressors and sustaining their motivation to persevere.

**Personal motivation**

The theme of *personal motivation* is not necessarily independent from *Social cohesion*, but rather consists of pressures that are felt as phenomena with consequences affecting the individual. Sub-themes included (1) *academic pressure*, (2) *achievement of goals*, (3) *comparison and competition* and (4) *inability to pursue personal interests*.

*Academic pressure*

Academic pressure was one of the most frequently mentioned stresses that affected the participants' lives, as mentioned in the following quotes:

> I'm stressed for my exam, apply for university. This is what I'm stressed for. You have to compete with lots of people to have the dream for the university. …就特别有压力, 因为从小, 因为我从小学开始 , …就是对英语来讲不是什么好学生, 英语, 英语作业 copy 一下, copy 一下抄一下, 然后, 然后什么上课听写单词, 就把那个书放在桌子下面, 老师念一个写一个, 念一个写一个 […so, it's especially stressful, because from when I was young, because from elementary school, ... I wasn't a good student in English, English homework copy once, copy again, copying again, and then some dictations in class, I would put the book under the desk, writing vocabulary the teacher dictated, dictating a word, writing a word].

At least half of the time spent in interviews covered academic stressors. The sheer amount of discussion about academic pressure is evident in its mention throughout every theme. Over 40% of surveyed students in Mainland China reported studying for over 60 hours a week inclusive of class time. Further, 79% of these students also reported worrying about poor grades, compared to 64% in Canada (OECD, 2017). While hours spent studying may not translate to better grades, additional studying and instruction hours is a large component of life for high-achieving students in China. In fact, students whose families have more financial resources in China tend to have less extracurricular activities, encouraging students to study instead (OECD, 2017). Considering the population of the private school in which this research was conducted, the students were likely expected to spend more time studying to maintain high academic scores. Discussions, policies, and interventions addressing mental health among students—particularly those from more privileged, urban populations in China—may lack meaningful impact if they do not concurrently engage with the role of academic pressures in shaping mental health.

*Achievement of goals*

The participants also mentioned the ways in which the ability to *achieve goals* affected their stress, with missing personal goals as a perceived failure: "SAT, this one makes me despair because I got the score and it not... um, I want my, I hoped it to be 1300, this number, then, but I only... I only get just only 1200. So it's not, didn't meet my expectations." When questioned, the participant in their third year explained that the score was not high enough for them to enter their preferred school after much time and effort invested into preparing for the SAT. The student was able to clarify that their emotions were regulated by their additional options for tertiary education, but there was frustration due to their broken dream.

A second-year student commented on two photos of a friend, one where the friend was crying and another where the friend's face was looking upward, biting their lip. The participant commented that their friend was struggling with skills needed for a physical education exam, and felt more confident after a classmate assisted with practicing the skill: "At first he don't know how to do, and now he know, and he friend help him, help her. He think he will successful." The focus on the friend's confidence in his success and possible achievement of a goal was highly influential in the emotional regulation as shown within the photos. The level of success in *achieving goals* seemed to play a large part in how emotions were experienced. This perspective suggests a potential application in emotional regulation interventions, whereby reframing goals and perceptions of achievement may serve as a useful strategy.

*Comparison and competition*

Not only did *achievement of goals* affect sense of accomplishment, it also elicited comparison to others. Whereas the comparison aspect is strongly affected by aspects of *Social cohesion*, especially regarding *blending in*, the competition aspect is further pushed through the aspect of living up to parental expectations and the normalization of class and university ranking systems (Chen et al., 2021). Such competitions seem to be internalized to the point that students often mention such comparison and competitiveness without mentioning parental influence. Some aspects of this competition were unavoidable, such as the need to take exams and compete for limited university places. However, some of this comparison became internalized and extended beyond academics. One second-year student, for instance, expressed feeling guilty for not pursuing their interests beyond an amateur level, especially when comparing themselves to others they perceived as more accomplished. This participant stated the following when comparing their skills with others:

> ...导致了我可能什么东西我都懂一点, 但是懂的不是特别多, 然后我看着他们弄得那么好我就在想他们这么厉害那我怎么, 诶我怎么怎么, 怎么怎么? 怎么垃圾?怎么菜? 怎么不好?...就是没用, 就是跟别人一比 就是小巫见大巫...
> [...lead to me knowing a bit of everything, but not knowing a lot, then watching them do so well, I think how are they so good and I'm, so, such, such garbage?

such a rookie? So bad? … So useless, when comparing to other, it's like a small sorcerer in the presence of a great one (idiom: pale into insignificance by comparison) …]

Another participant in their third year commented on a photo of many people within an exam hall where they took the SAT, and feeling both stress and a sense of success in being able to complete an academic achievement many others struggled with:

> Yeah lots of. This one. Lots of. And why I think this is stress and success because I finally complete my SAT test that time and I think is a little success and achievement of myself. And I think you see, because lots of people [a pit of ten thousand people] Because there are ten thousand people they took SAT test that time. In this Asia World Exhibition. And so I think this is a very good achievement and is a very memorable, that can let myself remember it forever.

*Comparison and competition* appear to amplify the significance of goals, thereby enhancing the sense of satisfaction when these goals are attained. However, when the competitive environment becomes excessively challenging, students may begin to interpret their inability to succeed as indicative of personal deficiency. Such interpretations of achievement should be discussed as part of mental health wellness, especially in a school setting.

### Inability to pursue personal interests

As mentioned in the section on *Optimism*, the ability to follow their *personal interests* was a motivating factor. The *inability to pursue these personal interests*, however, led to great disappointment and potentially lack of motivation.

A quote from one of the third-year participants shows the students' disappointment in their own achievements in what they were interested in: "You see I cannot pass, but only I couldn't pass the exam. So I... that time makes myself become very despair, because I'm very interested the subject of statistics … I want to study the data science of the statistics subjects in the university." Meanwhile, another student commented the following, "But when I go to my favourite activity… I will be very happy… Because I don't want to do something I don't like to do. Like in the future when I find job I don't want find job is boring."

Whereas not expressed as strongly as some of the other sub-themes, this sub-theme describes another mechanism for motivation. In particular, the emotional attachment to this motivating factor may affect their mental health when these goals are not met.

These last two themes of *Social cohesion* and *Personal motivation* outline two categories of great concern to the participants in terms of what they believed to be success or hope versus failure or despair. Addressing these concerns could be the first step in understanding the priorities and mindset of students, and thus a step into further engaging in relevant discussions about mental health.

When discussing the prompt of *despair*, participants recalled being faced with a situation that was uncontrollable regardless of the amount of effort put into changing it. Examples included struggling with stigma related to their mental illness diagnoses and unchanging test scores despite long periods of studying. Another participant, a third-year student, shared the consequences of the academic stress that they were facing: "Um, sometimes make myself feel tired, very tired and I will not do anything… Because of the pressure in study… Sometimes I feel hurt from my, I feel headache, I feel the depressed, I feel I cannot sleep well in the night". These examples demonstrate how the mentioned stressors could impact their mental wellness.

While *Social cohesion* and *Personal motivation* might appear to be competing themes, the data suggest that they often function in complementary manners. Many personal motivations expressed by participants were either aligned with, or appeared to be internalized forms of, broader social expectations. Within the interviews, no significant tension between these themes was observed. However, it is important to acknowledge that this alignment may not be universal; for other individuals, a dissonance between personal aspirations and societal expectations could emerge, potentially leading to heightened emotional and psychological distress, as displayed through studies of Asian international students in individualistic countries (Ma et al., 2020).

## Discussion

The themes identified provide a clearer understanding of what the students consider important to their mental health. Students expressed two categories of life influence that bring stress or hope: *Personal motivation* and *Social cohesion*. These students also revealed *Optimism* as a core coping mechanism that allows them to persevere through difficult challenges. The identification of these three themes provides a starting point for additional research into youth-described mental health concepts, as well as a feasible research methodology to engage youth in the creation of their own mental health models.

As an exploratory study, the focus was identifying themes rather than delving deeper into them. By constructing models of mental health that are relevant to Chinese youth, the models can address epistemic inequities in current mental health literature. As a budding profession, social work in China should focus on developing programs rooted in locally relevant theory and research rather than follow Western frameworks. Such culturally sensitive research can also inform policy development at both school and governmental levels, contributing to the development of the social work profession—particularly the role of school social workers supporting student mental health. Examples of the application of these themes into policy, practice and programming include the adaptation of psychoeducation, psychotherapy, and group programs in schools.

Psychoeducation based on the biomedical model has shown mixed results in reducing stigma, and generalizing the concept of mental health into more culturally appropriate themes may increase efficacy of psychoeducation on the reduction of stigma (Ren et al., 2020). Drawing upon concepts already familiar to students facilitates the introduction of new ideas in ways that are contextually relevant and culturally accessible to them. School social workers can use arts-

based methods to introduce various ways of defining mental health demonstrated in this study to encourage students to explore meaningful and less stigmatizing understandings of mental health.

Although psychotherapy is largely based on Western evidence and models (Ahsan, 2020), culturally relevant psychotherapy can be helpful in non-Western countries if used as one of many tools to address mental health (Koç & Kafa, 2019). When providing psychotherapy related services in Chinese schools, social workers should consider eliciting self-defined concepts of mental health while working with youths. For example, many themes that emerged in this study correlate with common strengths-based perspectives, which could be helpful for adolescents that have a stronger affinity for the concepts of personal motivation and optimism.

Mental health related programs in Chinese high schools should also consider student concerns. Group programs can have a social function, such as encouraging healthy relationships, which could positively influence student mental health. Considering the concerns around academic performance expressed by students in this study, social workers at high schools should advocate for partnerships with other departments to provide academic assistance. By evaluating the concerns of students and better understanding their perspectives, school social workers can better curate programs to benefit the mental health of students in China.

## Limitations

Despite the contributions of this study, there are some limitations to consider, including the difficulty in obtaining parental consent for potential participants, language and cultural barriers between the lead researcher and the students, limited participant access to personal electronic devices on school property, and the limited scope of this exploratory study.

The nature of recruitment meant that the participants who volunteered and were able to obtain parental permission to participate may have been different from the rest of the school population. While two potential participants were unable to secure parental permission, discussions with them did not indicate that mental health stigma played a role in the refusal. Notably, among those who did participate, little apparent tension emerged between the themes of *Social cohesion* and *Personal motivation*. It is possible that engaging with students who were unable to participate may have revealed greater tension between these themes, offering additional or more nuanced insights. Unfortunately, academic focus is a large part of parental refusal for extracurricular activities in mainland China (OECD, 2017), and this traditional perspective may also inhibit the further development of social work in schools. Traditional hierarchical boundaries between families and schools can not only hinder research of mental health in schools, but also the development and delivery of services. Mental health concerns are often considered private matters, with children socialized to avoid discussing such issues outside the family. This cultural norm, combined with the authoritative role of schools in China, may result in resistance from families, students, and school administrators alike (Levine & Zhu, 2010).

There was also a deeper language and cultural barrier, where the researcher and participants could communicate at a surface level but may have missed potential suggestions or opportunities

for clarification. While the second author was a native Mandarin speaker and provided assistance through the transcription and translation of the recorded discussions, the first author may have missed potential opportunities for further discussion during interviews due to linguistic and cultural barriers. Future research should consider recruiting interviewers who are native speakers and thoroughly understand the local context.

The participants did not formally have access to personal electronic devices while on school property. Although this was not often enforced outside of class time, participants still may have missed out on opportunities to capture some experiences that they wanted to share. Collaboration with school administration and teaching staff could help to mitigate this issue, as well as providing cameras for research purposes.

The origin and development of optimism as a coping mechanism was not deeply investigated within this exploratory study, but students mentioned that they learned optimism from family, friends, and media portrayals of perseverance, solidarity, and mutual encouragement. In-depth analysis into the origins of perseverance and optimism is suggested for future research. As an exploratory study, there remains much to be expanded on, and further research is encouraged to better explore concepts local and relevant to youth.

## Conclusion

This research breaks ground in arts-based mental health research in China focusing on youth. By describing mental health using concepts produced by youth, mental health literature and frameworks can be revolutionized both in China and worldwide. More research into this topic is needed, as research on youth perspectives in mental health is scarce in China. Fresh perspectives of youth indigenous to non-Western cultures would enrich and expand understandings of mental health. Using youth-centred and culturally sensitive approaches to bridge modern and traditional views of mental health may be a successful way of developing programs that promote mental health and lower stigma. Understanding a few aspects of mental health from the perspectives of Chinese students is a first step to understanding mental health in a world where it is highly stigmatized. Conducting mental health research from diverse perspectives is essential to building effective programming and address the inequity in knowledge generation in the field of mental health.

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## Declaration of conflicting interests

The authors have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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